'Not Like the Rest of Us' - Masculine Idyll and the (Im)possibility of Love in Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar*

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Abstract:
Gore Vidal's controversial fourth novel *The City and the Pillar* (1948), has been noted for its explicit portrayal of homosexuality in post-World War II. America and its investment in dissolving the asserted dichotomy of masculinity and same sex desire. Its protagonist Jim Willard has been mostly characterized as self-involved in his endeavor to reconcile dominant gender narratives and his sexual attraction to other men. The masculine idyll he fetishizes in his imagination, in most existing analyses of the novel, seems to paralyze his ability to actually engage with others, to direct his desire outward and render love and kinship impossible. In the following essay, I will offer a reading that circumvents a definition of desire as being intrinsically tied to the self-contained ego. I seek to show how the relation of homosexual individual and the external world, including homosexual subculture as well as heteronormative mainstream culture, is regulated by culturally and socially prescribed narratives of manhood. R.W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity will be incorporated in this analysis to account for the constitutive power of masculinity in constructing a subject position that tries to mend the gap between gender and sexual identity. The aim of this essay is to explore how Vidal's novel negotiates the struggle of the homosexual individual to express and pursue love and desire while still adhering to a standardized normative masculinity.

1 I think you're the unluckiest type. (...) You'll attract everybody, yet you won't be able to do anything about it. Not really. Oh, maybe someday you'll find a woman, but not a man. You're not like the rest of us, who want a mirror. It's exciting in a way but it's also sad. (85)

On the onset of their affair, Paul Sullivan confronts Jim Willard, the protagonist of Gore Vidal's *The City and the Pillar* (1948), with these observations. These statements addresses the ongoing struggle Jim faces: the perceived gap between him, a young man who is sexually attracted to other men and the "rest of us", as Sullivan points out, those who identify as homosexual. In fact, Sullivan suggests that Jim might be a better fit for a woman, after all. His ability to "attract everybody" when he is not "able to do anything about it", constitutes both his allure as well as his tragedy, what makes him both "exciting" and "sad": not being "able to do anything about it" coevally denotes Jim's failure to control the signals and impulses he sends to others as well as his inability to properly act on the reactions he stirs. Jim is reduced to the passivity of being desired and rendered incapable of truly desiring anything or anyone else. There is an implicit accusation of Jim being self-involved and a narcissist, which is, at once, contradicted by Sullivan's claim that those who Jim is different from, really just "want a mirror". Sullivan is unaware that Jim's driving aim, leading him up

to this point, has been his desire to be reunited with his "twin" (72), his mirror, Bob Ford, the boy from high school that Jim spent a night with at a deserted cabin and whom he has been longing for ever since. In this respect, contrary to what Sullivan believes, Jim appears to be very much like the "rest of us". What is revealed and spearheaded by Sullivan's description is the intricate and troubling relation between the individual experience of homosexuality and a socially constituted sexual identity. This tension seems to render a stable self-knowledge impossible.

2 Set in 1940s, *The City and the Pillar* (henceforth abbreviated as *City*) chronicles the journey of protagonist Jim Willard, mapping both his geographical as well his psychological itinerary. After his first sexual encounter with Bob, Jim traces Bob's footsteps by following his example of going to sea. His travels on the West Coast lead him to Los Angeles where he works as a tennis instructor before eventually becoming the lover of film star Ronald Shaw. Through Shaw he meets and begins a relationship with the unsuccessful writer Paul Sullivan whom he follows to Mexico and then finally to New York City. After the end of their romance and a brief stint in the army, Jim settles in New York City permanently, again working on a tennis court. He drifts through gay subcultures of casual sex before finally being reunited with Bob, who has returned to their home in Virginia and is now a husband and a father. Jim visits home to see Bob and invites him to New York in hopes of rekindling their relationship that he has since idealized as the only possible image of love between him and another man, which does not challenge his normative understanding of masculinity, one that is tied to heteronormative conventions of kinship. His desire of picking up where he and Bob left off is disappointed as Bob trenchantly rejects his advances. In the novel's original edition, Jim strangles and kills Bob in the end. In the revised version, which will be treated as the definitive one in this essay, Jim rapes Bob, neglects him in his apartment and drifts of into the night, continuing on a journey that is prospectively as restless as the one depicted over the course of the novel.[1]

[1] Vidal rewrote the novel's ending for a 1965 edition since, as he notes in its introduction, many had deemed the original ending too "melodramatic" (xvi). He concedes: "I had always meant the end of the book to be black,but not as black as it turned out" (xvi). While changing the novel's conclusion from Jim killing Bob to raping and then neglecting him, is a significant modification, Vidal maintains that the character of Jim Willard remains unchanged; the emotional ramifications, namely the violent dissolution of his imaginary romantic counterpart, are virtually the same, yet, in not turning his protagonist into a murderer in the end, Vidal argues to have alleviated the dramatic effect of the original final chapter. This notion could be contested elsewhere but will not be the focus of the present essay. As most subsequent analyses, the revised version will, here, be taken as the definitive version.

Flat Prose and a Gay Male Subjectivity

3 Upon its publication in 1948, Vidal's forth novel was met with, as Stephen Adams describes it, "shock and disbelief" (15) at its frank depiction of homosexuality. Vidal remembered the critical reaction to City as hostile, which neither stopped the novel from becoming a bestseller nor did it, as predicted by some critics then, end Vidal's literary career. Even though the novel has since been recognized as an important entry into the canon of early gay literature, a sense of repudiation and reservation prevails in discussions of the book. Especially its style, which Vidal himself called "flat gray prose" (xv), has been a recurring point of critique. In his review "The Fate of the Novel" (1948), Leslie Fiedler describes Vidal's controversial work as "self-effacing, underwritten and resolutely dull" and notes its display of the characteristic "flatness of naturalism" (523). Further the novel has been compared mostly unfavorably to Truman Capote's *Other Voices, Other Rooms* which was published the same year and tackles similar controversial topics - Vidal was well-aware of this comparison, in which his work was likened to gay pulp fiction opposed to Capote's more sophisticated prose.

4 Reading *City* as a naturalist narrative means to subscribe to the notion of a determinist project at hand, that is to suppose the novel is making absolute claims concerning societal and cultural structures and the homosexual subject within this structure. The emphatic portrayal of masculinity in this work, as in many other early gay novels, becomes instrumental in arriving at essentialist interpretations of their representation of homosexual identities and the experiences they produce. Robert J. Corber's "Gore Vidal and the Erotics of Masculinity" (1994) pursues the aim of allocating a "gay male subjectivity" along the lines of binary conceptions of gender and sexuality, specifically, masculinity and homosexuality. The negotiation of this binary is interlocked in protagonist Jim Willard who is depicted as an athlete and typical middle-class boy - two categories seemingly conflated in a standardized conception of masculinity - but who also desires men at the same time. Yet, as Corber points out himself, Vidal's larger project appears to be the deconstruction of limited and limiting narratives of homosexuality and arguably the dissolution of homosexuality as a category of identity altogether. Hence the conception of *gay* male subjectivity remains troubling as it

suggests complacency with an idea of a deducible gay experience, that is an essentialized experience that is transferable from the individual homosexual to all homosexuals.[2]

5 Other analyses of the novel, especially from the 1960s have undertaken the paradoxical task of interpreting the naturalism of Vidal's novel metaphorically. The symbolism invoked by the novel's title - a reference to the biblical story of Sodom and Gomorra, also quoted in the epigraph -, but that is notably absent in its plain style, is applied to the narrative and opens out into a deterministic reading of the novel. Stanton Hoffman ascribes gay literature at large the task of creating a "gay world" (195) that is, in his reading, "not only the only place where the individual homosexual is made to feel he can exist but also is the result of his guilt over his choice of a way of life, the result of his acceptance of the stereotypes of a culture and an obsessive consciousness of effeminacy and masculinity." (196) Here, the dichotomy between masculinity and homosexuality resurfaces - through guilt and the threat of effeminacy - and, in Stanton's analyses "transforms a theme of homosexual love into a theme of the impossibility of love in America" (195). Individual desires, in this instance same sex desire, which are at odds with norms that are held to be commonly accepted, have to be suppressed and remain liminal. In short, Stanton reads the "gay world", the different gay subcultures protagonist Jim traverses as provisional spaces of short-lived recognition that offer no durable relief and, more importantly, no love or meaningful kinship. Taking the novel's stylistic flatness at face value and interpreting the lack of redemption and tangible foreclosure of its protagonist - what has he learned in the end? - as programmatic for and symptomatic of the "gay world", Stanton arrives at a conclusion of an "impossibility of love". As most of these analyses note, Vidal's proclaimed aim with *City* was to present homosexuality not as pathological, or a disease, as was widely held at the time of its publication, but as something natural - an aspect that only engenders deterministic and essentialist readings, leading Hoffman to extend this grim interpretation of the "gay world" to all of America.

Hegemonic Masculinity and the Sociality of Desire

6 I want to return to Corber's essay once again, to establish the point of departure - in a double sense - for the argument I want to sketch in the following. The pervasiveness and negotiation of masculinity or, as Corber writes with respect to Vidal's novel, the practice of

[2] Corber anticipates this criticism, conceding that Vidal project is "anti-essentialist" and terms the subjectivity Vidal imagines in the novel as "utopian" rather than "minoritarian" (48). The distinction remains as elusive as the subjectivity it seeks to describe and appears rather as a terminological appropriation that still tries to transcribe a communal experience of homosexuality in post-world war II. America.

"masculinizing" subjects, which pointedly highlights the perpetual state of becoming in the performance of gender, plays an integral role in discussing gay literature, both with respect to its narratives told and the framework, the demarcating notion of a *gay* literature. I want to modify a statement by Corber which I believe gravely impacts the way we understand masculinity as a regulating structure of social lives, cultural imaginaries and an individual marker of identity. Corber maintains: "Despite their relative autonomy, sexuality and gender function in *The City and the Pillar* as mutually constitutive categories of identity" (34). What appears as just another rather uncontroversial configuration of addressing the asserted binary relation of gender and sexuality actually brushes over a contradiction of vital importance. How could these "mutually constitutive categories" exist in "relative autonomy"? The world "relative" deemphasizes what I seek to stress, namely, the highly relational and dependent nature of masculinity and homosexuality. If, as Corber concludes, "patriarchal forms of masculinity provide the greatest obstacle for gay liberation" (50), there clearly is an imbalance in distribution of power in the interplay of the two which means that rather than being mutually constitutive, at their intersection one seems to overpower the other. The creation of a gay subjectivity is complicated by the privileged position of masculinity over sexual desire, one negating the legitimacy of the other. Recognizing this actually allows for a clearer understanding of the political stake in Corber's argument, which he calls "gay liberation". The struggle between the individual homosexual and the external frameworks of heterosexist culture and subordinated gay subcultures is clearly rooted in the hegemonic application of an idealized manhood that appears incommensurate with same-sex desire.

7 The concept of hegemonic masculinity, as introduced by R.W. Connell (1987, 2005), is highly instructive in the analysis of these power relations and their repercussions for the homosexual individual, in Vidal's novel. Connell defines hegemonic masculinity not as "a fixed character type, always and everywhere the same" but rather as "the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable" (2005, 76). She points to the existence of "multiple masculinities" (76) that are constituted in a field of cultural relations and notes that especially in the individualist culture of the United States, the tensions between individual configurations of such masculinities and the larger realm of possibilities and practices have to be taken into account to understand the dominance of particular masculinity types.[3]

[3] Connell first developed the concept of multiple masculinities in her work *Gender and Power* (1987). The notion of a hegemonic masculinity, which has been integral in the formation of the field of masculinity studies,

8 I want to enhance this approach, which stresses the relational dynamic of masculinities in shaping subject positions against the backdrop of culturally enforced gender practices, by including Leo Bersani's work in his essay "Sociality and Sexuality" (2010), which examines how individual desire comes to interact with the social. Bersani offers a definition of desire that is no longer confined to a psychoanalytical conception, which establishes desire as always expressing a lack that cannot be satisfied and inevitably always refers back to the self-contained structure of the ego. Bersani suggests that desire is object-bound and directed outside the self and is constituted in and constitutive of social practices. Opposed to a conceptualization of desire "as the mistaken reaction to a loss" (105), as held in psychoanalytical thought, Bersani notes how "[d]esire mobilizes correspondence of being." (113) This comprehension of desire opens up new readings of Vidal's novel and particularly its protagonist. Jim's inability of enlivening his desire and extending it to the outside world can be read as more than mere narcissism but shows how sexual identities are governed and reigned it by the forces of dominant gender narratives. Desire comes to be recognized as acting upon or being delimitated by the social.

9 I want to present a reading of *The City and The Pillar* that accounts for the struggle of reconciling individual sexual identities and socialized gender practices. Rather than differentiating these two poles by characterizing the individual as hermetically closed, I want to conceptualize both structures as open to social dynamics while still recognizing that the hegemonic force of masculinity is integral in regulating both and becomes defining in the production of meanings and self-knowledge.

Mirrors and the Masculine Idyll

10 "I do my traveling on the other side of town" (20), Jim Willard replies to his younger brother John's inquiries concerning his lack of romantic involvement with girls. This statement is uttered in passing, as Jim prepares to spend a night at a remote cabin with his high school buddy Bob Ford and bears implications Jim himself at this point does not openly acknowledge or is seemingly unaware of. A popular kid in his school and a successful athlete on the tennis squad, Jim discards bewilderment over his disinterest in going on dates, by claiming Bob and him, as well as the entire baseball team, do not like to "mess around with the 'nice girls'" (20) and therefore seek pleasure elsewhere - a claim that rings defensive and hardly truthful. Jim deflects the line of questioning he is subjected to, by referring to a world

was further explored in the first edition of *Masculinities* in 1995 and has since been subject to revision and reconfiguration. My analysis is based on the most recent use of the term in the revised edition from 2005.

of mature manhood that is impenetrable and cannot be challenged by his inexperienced younger brother. Jim's knowledge of this world, though, appears rather as a claim to an external idea of manhood than being founded in a personal familiarity with it.

11 The presence of mirrors and Jim's frequent inspection of his reflection saliently recurs throughout the novel. He evades his brother's interrogation by studying his image in the mirror. "Was he handsome? His features were perfectly ordinary, he thought; only his body pleased him, the result of much exercise" (20). The ordinariness of his features and the masculine composition of his body consolidate Jim's adherence with the hard and fast rule of manhood. To be "ordinary" means, in Jim's case, successful impression management and defying suspicions and dangers of effeminacy looming in his desire for Bob, or at later stages of the novel, his relations to other men. As he becomes exposed to homosexual men who fail to meet these masculine standards, the mirror becomes a site of anxious self-examination. "Often after he had been among them, he would study himself in a mirror to see if there was any trace of the woman in his face or manner; and he was always pleased there was not" (66). Jim's obsession with his image in the mirror, by virtue of the image of the mirror, could easily be read as narcissist, though, rather than self-indulgence, this appears to be a practice of reassuring himself that he is still in accordance with socially normative masculinity. What Jim is looking for is not necessarily beauty, even though his lovers frequently confirm his attractiveness, but what looks ordinary, meaning what bears no trace of effeminacy. His anxiety to be perceived as effeminate increases more and more as he is exposed to homosexuals who display stereotypical characteristics and heighten his fear of recognizing himself in them.

12 Just as much as Jim has to reaffirm his masculinity to himself, he is only able to endure the instabilities of his compliance with this ideal, by creating Bob as his mirror image. Both sustain their manhood, which allows Jim to frame the nature of their relationship as natural, as an amalgamation of two parts that make up a whole. Their encounter in the cabin is described as their bodies colliding "with a primal violence, like to like, metal to magnet, half to half and the whole restored" (29). Bob complies with Jim's reasoning by deflecting their passionate encounter as "awful kid stuff" and contending "guys aren't supposed to do that with each other" (30). While Bob is able to compare their intimacy to his experience with women, and clearly maintains that it is different from that and not right, for Jim this incident sets the template for a conception of idealized sexual relations. This ideal manifests in what Jim himself realizes is not reality but only materializes in dreams.

> Jim Willard's erotic life took place almost entirely in dreams. Until the day with Bob beside the river, he had dreamed of women as often as of men, and there had seemed no boundary between the two. But since that summer day, Bob was the constant dream-lover, and girls no longer intruded upon their perfect masculine idyll. He was aware that what he dreamed of was not what normal men dreamed of. But at the same time he made no connection between what he and Bob had done and what his new acquaintances did. (...) Finally, he decided that he was unique. He was the only one who had done what he had done and felt the way he did. (66)

This passage encapsulates the mutually besetting of Jim's internality and his relation to the outside world, his object of affection Bob and the cultural narratives and norms he in turn is subjected to. His acknowledgment of being "unique" reveals the ambiguity of reconciling ideals of masculinity with his desire for Bob. The two can only coexist in Jim's fantasy, where a "perfect masculine idyll" can be preserved. Women are explicitly excluded from this idyll, as Jim seeks to imagine a masculinity that does not require the affirmation of manhood through a female counterpart.[4]

Being Ordinary in a World of Multiple Masculinities

13 So far, I have focused on aspects of Vidal's protagonist Jim Willard that would qualify as rather internal than relational, such as his investment in preserving appearances and impressions, as well as imaginative acts of idealization and masculinzation with respect to making sense of his attraction and devotion to Bob. Yet, as I have shown, all of these aspects are less linked to a self-contained and ego-driven notion of desire but is in constant interaction with an idea of masculinity that seems external. What feels natural to Jim, such as his feelings towards Bob, is contested by the threat of effeminacy, a threat embodied by other homosexuals who openly display the stereotypical characteristics Jim resent. To distinguish himself from these homosexuals and misleading them not to recognize him as one of them, becomes an incessant goal in the way Jim manages his external appearance. Jim's internality and the externalities of the gay worlds he encounters, painfully seem to affirm the

[4] For a thorough analysis of Jim's relationship or rather state of alienation towards women, I want to refer to Corber's essay which is particularly concerned with the similarities between the constitution of gay male and female subjectivities. Whereas Corber emphasizes potential alliances that could be formed in challenging the preponderance of straight male vesting in cultural narratives, I would read the narrations commentary on Jim's view on women as expressing his affliction by pressures to participate in heteronormative practices of masculinity. Women are usually shown as disrupting homosocial moments and represent a set of expectation to perform something that actually seems unnatural to Jim. This becomes apparent after Jim and his fellow seaman Collins pick up women at a bar in Seattle. They head to the girls' apartment where on of the women, Emily, tries to seduce Jim. An image of Bob stops him from having sex with her and he flees. The narration concludes: "At the moment when what should happen was about to happen, the image of Bob had come between him and the girl, rendering the act obscene and impossible. What to do? He would not exorcise the ghost of Bob even if he could. Yet he realized it would be difficult matter to live in a world of men and women without participating in their ancient and necessary duet" (53).

contradiction of what looks "ordinary" on the surface but contains something that is "unique". The idyll Jim imagines is tied to a past that is perpetually tried by the present.

> My two lovers in this novel were athletes and so drawn to the entirely masculine that, in the case of one, Jim Willard, the feminine was simply irrelevant to his passion to unite with his other half, Bob Ford: unfortunately for him, Bob had other sexual plans, involving women and marriage. (xiii)

14 The differentiating aspect of Jim's and Bob's desire lies in their "sexual plans". "Women and marriage" designate more than just another end of the spectrum of sexual orientations but also symbolize a constitutive unit of a cultural narrative of masculinity that is shifting in the historical moment after WWII. The "masculine idyll" that Jim continues to fetishize throughout the novel represents not only an event of his past but also points to a romantic history of the homosocial that is overturned by what Corber refers to as "domestication of masculinity" (38) in the looming 1950s and the emergence of family life in the American suburbs. Masculinity in this post-war moment becomes increasingly affiliated to the role of the patriarch, head of the nuclear family, more so than through relations and mutual affirmation between men.

15 The notion of a "masculine idyll", emblematically enshrined in Jim's experience with Bob by the river, is historically contingent with larger narratives of the homosocial, specific, and as postulated by Leslie Fiedler in his work *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1970) characteristic of American literature and culture. Along the lines of Fiedler's thesis, Stephen Adams recounts the reading of their romantic episode in their isolated idyll of manhood as reproducing a narrative of "homoerotic romances between runaway males who escape the “civilizing” influence of woman and the adult sexual relation she symbolizes, by retreating to some primordial wilderness" (16). This romance between runaway male stands in staunch contrast to the life Jim knows at home: the relationship with his father is notably strained, whose patriarchal role is endowed through its investment in domestic life. As he notes to Jim, the morning before his "escape" with Bob: "It is amazing to me why you want to sleep away from our own home which we have tried at such expense to make comfortable..." (17). Bob, on the other hand, lives in a far less comfortable home, which, after his mother's death, is headed by an alcoholic father. The expectations set in him as "the son of the town drunk" (17) are far less pressing and unlike Jim, who should be bound for college after graduation, thinks "[c]ollege is too much work" (26) but dreams of going first to New York City and finally to sea. Jim is drawn to this less constrictive type of masculinity that Bob comes to embody but struggles to follow his desire to go with him. "I'm afraid to leave home and the family, not

that I like them all that much …" (27). Not only does Bob in this moment represent a fixture of sexual desire for Jim but simultaneously and by extension becomes an ideal for a masculinity that remains unattainable but profusely tempting.

16 In stressing the socially and structurally open nature of both masculinity and sexual desire, I want to draw upon Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's contribution to the notion of the homosocial in her work *Between Men* (1985). She argues that "[t]o draw the homosocial back into the orbit of 'desire' of the potentially erotic, then, is to hypothesize the potential unbrokenness of a continuum between homosocial and homosexual" (1). For Jim and Bob this continuum is far more than hypothetically unbroken but actively transgressed. The demarcating line between the homosocial, a male bond and companionship, and the homosexual, marked by active desiring and physical intimacy, is blurred and in Jim's imagination legitimized as co-extensive of one another. Yet, he realizes and is constantly reminded that this rupture of the continuum can only take place outside stipulated regulations of masculinity. His peaks into other gay worlds expose the instability of his justifications and can only prevail through insistence that he and Bob are different, he is even "unique", but ordinary all at once. The oscillation between these poles, the compartmentalization of desire and masculinity, never stabilizes and forces Jim to constantly drift and then stop to reexamine whether his uniqueness is still balanced in an ordinary surface, one that does not give away his desire to be with other men.

17 In her definition of hegemonic masculinity, Connell establishes the plurality of narratives revolving around manhood based on social and historical context. "With growing recognition of the interplay between gender, race and class it has become common to recognize multiple masculinities. (...) To recognize more than one kind of masculinity is only a first step. We have to examine the relations between them"(76). I have touched upon the tension of the masculinity as enacted in Jim's socio-cultural environment which is contrasted by a less restrictive and traditional masculinity as engendered in what Bob and their sexual experience comes to embody. These two narratives, of a domesticated masculinity on the one hand and a “runaway” masculinity on the other, represent two powerful counterparts that meet eye to eye in the cultural realm of possibilities, even though one appears to be in process of replacing the other. Connell further differentiates these multiple masculinities, acknowledging that not all types of masculinity are accepted in contesting these dominant types. The concept of hegemony eminently entails practices of subordination and also produces marginalized forms of masculinity, which are oppressed and stigmatized within the larger sphere of sexual policing (78-80). Effeminacy, as described earlier, is among these

marginalized masculinities and is represented through the homosexuals Jim encounters when moving to the Los Angeles and eventually in his relationship with Actor Ronald Shaw.

Performing Masculinities

18 Upon his arrival in Los Angeles, Jim begins to work as a tennis instructor at a hotel and soon learns of the existence of a gay subculture in Tinseltown. Despite being warned about being corrupted by this underworld, Jim is eventually drawn into it.

> Jim went through several stages after his discovery that there were indeed many men who liked other men. His first reaction was disgust and alarm. He scrutinized everyone carefully. Was he one? After a while he could identify the obvious ones by their tight, self-conscious manner, particularly when they moved, neck and shoulders rigid. (...) Finally, one tried to seduce him. Jim was quite unnerved, and violent in his refusal. Yet afterwards he continued to go to their parties, if only to be able to experience again the pleasure of saying no. (60)

After an initial reaction of disdain and shock over the ruthless subversion of masculinity, Jim gradually gives in. His practice of observation and examination, so often applied to himself, receives a tangible counterbalance from an external world that transgresses what he has so far held to be a given and was only foiled by an imagined stereotype he never truly encountered for himself. He becomes used to their "tight, self-conscious manner" and when he is introduced to renowned actor Ronald Shaw, he finally gives in. His own transgression beyond the ordinary passes with remarkable ease as one of his homosexual friends notes with respect to the famous Shaw: "So maybe you're not queer, but *this* is an exception. Why, this is something people dream about. You could make a fortune out of him" (65). Jim is able to conceal his attraction - less to Shaw in particular but the social and sexual world he signifies - by legitimizing his affair with a man through its financial advantages and the opportunity to share Shaw's affluent lifestyle. Status and upward mobility, at least temporarily and within the context of a status-oriented and fame-worshipping community, allow Jim to circumvent his ideals of masculinity.

19 Jim's relationship with Shaw is marked by ambivalence, because he is both taken by Shaw's success and esteem but equally notices his vanities and desire for incessant validation. Still, Jim complies with what Shaw desires, especially after moving into his mansion. Shaw, in fact, very similar to Jim, is driven by sustaining an exterior ideal that his lovers have to facilitate. "If a boy came to love him (and disregard the legend) Shaw was affronted and endangered"(62). Scrutinizing this "legend" poses a threat to Shaw who while selecting his lovers "for a combination of physical beauty and hard masculinity" (62), only offers male

dominance through nourishment and accommodation but is susceptible to being exposed as feminine. The relationship of Jim and Shaw is less founded on authentic interaction or intimacy but rather a mutual affirmation of successful gender and social performance. For Shaw this entails proclaiming his love to Jim, who is able to tell, is seemingly even relieved to recognize this as "acting" (72). Shaw's profession as a movie star offers both allure for Jim to explore new social circles while also commenting inscriptively upon the performative and surface-based nature of gender enactments.

20 Sullivan, whom Jim meets in Shaw's circle of Hollywood friends, offers an ostensibly different impulse that draws Jim to him and away from Shaw and leads them to take up a contemporary companionship. Upon their first meeting, Jim is struck by how Sullivan digresses from the patterns of homosexual performance he has grown accustomed to in Shaw's company. "Most of the people that visited Shaw were alike. (...) Sexually they were obvious, unlike Sullivan, who appeared perfectly normal" (81). With his "perfectly normal" appearance, Sullivan offers Jim a new possibility of imagining a homosexuality that is not at odds with masculinity, after all. Yet, as their affair progresses, Jim becomes aware of both the pending dangers of being with someone who is similar to him, as well as the cracks in Sullivan's appearance and the vulnerabilities they brush over. Throughout the conversation, from which the quote at the beginning of this essay is taken, Jim recognizes himself in many of Sullivan's assessments of him. This leads him to fear his external performance is failing and he begins to feel endangered by the insights Sullivan offers. Though Jim is initially drawn to their similarities and the fact that there was truthfulness possible between him and Sullivan, their intimacy begins to bare the danger of having the authenticity of his appearance and masculinity challenged. "With self-knowledge came alarm" (85). The danger of being confronted with his internal conflict leads him to defensively conclude that Sullivan has "revealed himself as just like the others" (85).

The (Im)possibility of Love

21 Jim's profound fear of being confronted with the tension and discrepancy of his internal life and its external manifestation is what blockades his relationships with Shaw and Sullivan and causes most of his other sexual encounters to remain fleeting. After he moves to New York City, he frequents gay bars and cruises strangers. He refrains from having steady partners and makes few friends as "[i]t was easier to have sex with a man than to acquire a friend" (166). Only dealing with bodily surfaces and their sexual force appears less threatening than actually engaging in any emotional intimacy, even if this confirms a

trepidation which occurs to him in his relationship with Sullivan: He might end up living a life of "[e]ndless drifting, promiscuity, defeat" (85). Hoffman's argument of the "impossibility of love" rings through these passages, illustrated for example by Jim wondering whether he is indeed "unfeeling in his relationships" (85). However, I want to relativize his fatalistic and deterministic reading. Even though Jim believes to only be "capable of love, at least with someone who could be his brother" (85), his desire for love, the longing for a brotherhood in which such a love is possible should not be dismissed as an inwardly directed assurance of his ego. Rather, the terminology, conceptualization and limitations of his desire are confined by the few and restrictive narratives available to him to makes sense of an identity that tries to both entail a maintainable masculinity as well as his desire to be with men. His dream world, revolving around the pastoral ideal of him and Bob by the water, bundles an unassailable masculinity and his sexual longing for a man. It is not only a phantasmal construct, though, but also an expression of the limitations stressed upon his individuality by hegemonic masculinity.

22 The novel's ending, his reunion with Bob, represents a violent intervention into in Jim's imagined idyll, as it confronts the unattainable idea of his union with a reality that sees Bob resisting him astutely. Now married and a father, Bob has complied with the domesticated masculinity that he and Jim had rejected during their isolated moment of intimacy and that Jim has revisited so frequently and perfected in the years following their parting. When Bob comes to visit him in New York City, Jim purposefully takes him to a gay bar, tensely anticipating Bob's reaction and expecting him to recommit himself to joining Jim in this new outlying gay world. His strategy yields no response and he tries to seduce Bob back at his apartment. Bob angrily resists his advances - "Let go of me, you queer!" (202) - leading Jim to violently force himself upon him. The "masculine idyll" he had imagined is destroyed when he rapes his twin and thereby undermines Bob's manhood irretrievably. For Jim this event marks "a circle completed, and finished" (203). Upon leaving, he touches the pillow Bob's face had been pressed to, recognizing it drenched in tears, a final blow and sign that he has emasculated the man that had represented the idealized manhood he had aspired to and clenched onto throughout his journey.

23 Drifting through the New York night, Jim comes to acknowledge that there is no returning to the love and manhood, he had imagined and had measured himself and his partners against. "The lover and brother is gone, replaced by a memory of bruised flesh, tangled sheets, violence" (207). Instead of reading this ending as final disillusionment and recognition of the impossibility of love, I want to suggest that the frustration of his

internalized conception of masculinity and its perseverance in a confined idyll opens the possibility to finally circumvent the demarcating lines of hegemonic masculinity. By no longer subscribing to an ideal which he himself so violently deconstructed, arises the chance of transcending types of homosexuality and directing desire at external objects. Returning to Bersani's statement of desire "mobilizing correspondence", the final sentence of the novel suggests that the collision and subsequent dismembering of his romanticized object of affection, will not render Jim immobile after all. "Soon he would move on" (207).

24 The tension between individual desire and the cultural narratives of masculinity that condition social practices remains unresolved at the novel's conclusion. In raping his "brother", the idyll of Jim's fantasy is exposed as finally unattainable and ruptured by the violent masculinity that had confined this imaginary to begin with. Despite the climax of having destroyed the aim of his desire, an impossible illusion as it turns out, Jim is shown to continue on. Bob can no longer function as the vanishing point of his desire, which actually opens the possibility for love and recognition by forcing Jim to assert himself differently. At the historical point in time of *The City and the Pillar*'s publication, the narratives available to imagine same sex desire within hegemonic discourses of masculinity were lacking. Yet, Jim's moving on seems liberated from wanting a mirror, a lover in his image and a beginning self-knowledge of rather than having to pass as ordinary he will come to grips with not being "like the rest of us".

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