

# Contrary Witnesses: John Addington Symonds, Samuel R. Delany and the Historiography of the Unspeakable<sup>❖</sup>

*Earl Dewayne Jackson, Jr.\**

## ABSTRACT

In the decades following Stonewall, the coming out story has become not only a personal milestone but a stalwart narrative trope, both on screen and in the lives of celebrities whose careers do not end with the revelation of their sexuality. Yet it was not long ago that “the love that dare not speak its name” characterized stories that could not be told. In this essay, I will consider J. A. Symonds’ posthumous *Memoirs* and Samuel R. Delany’s remarkable autobiography in the context of earlier attempts to tell such stories to delineate the narrative strategies involved in what could be seen from a contemporary perspective as a historiography of the “unspeakable.” Both *The Memoirs* of J. A. Symonds and Samuel R. Delany’s *The Motion of Light on Water* are, among other things, responses to the suppression of male homosexuality in the writers’ respective societies. Both writers seek to describe and to surmount the cognitive dissonance between the lived experience of homosexual and gay men and the complete exclusion of that range of experience from legitimate discourse. These personal histories are at once testimonials concerning the consequences of the “unspeakability” of the writer’s desire and attempts to gloss that unspeakability. But the divergence in Symonds and Delany’s reactions to the spectacle of consummated homosexual desire, as recorded in their respective narratives, illuminates the cultural and political differences in each writer’s conception of the subject and the subject’s relation to experience and history.

---

<sup>❖</sup> The author wishes to thank the two anonymous readers whose diligence and interventions were immensely helpful and contributed significantly to the final version of this essay.

<sup>\*</sup> Received: March 19, 2021; Accepted: July 27, 2021

Earl Dewayne Jackson, Jr., Chair Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Asia University, Taiwan ([earljac@gmail.com](mailto:earljac@gmail.com)).

**KEYWORDS:** Samuel R. Delany, queer theory, memoir, J. A. Symonds, marginalized histories

In the decades following Stonewall, the coming out story has become not only a personal milestone but a familiar narrative trope, both on screen and in the lives of celebrities whose careers do not end with the revelation of their sexuality. Although this greater freedom to claim and proclaim one's sexuality in public is welcome, it is also important to remember that such relatively consequence-free leeway is both geographically and temporally limited. It was not long ago that "the love that dare not speak its name" characterized stories that could not be told (Douglas). In this essay, I will consider J. A. Symonds' posthumous *Memoirs* and Samuel R. Delany's remarkable autobiography in the context of earlier attempts to tell such stories to delineate the narrative strategies involved in what could be seen from a contemporary perspective as a historiography of the "unspeakable."

As the subtitle indicates, *The Motion of Light on Water: East Village Sex and Science Fiction Writing: 1960-1965* focuses on Samuel R. Delany's life in the first half of the 1960s, during which time he published five science fiction novels and produced a thousand-page manuscript of his autobiographical novel *Voyage, Orestes!* much of which was lost.<sup>1</sup> *Motion* includes vivid portraits of the first years of Delany's marriage with the poet Marilyn Hacker, his sex life within various homosexual networks, his nervous breakdown and recovery in 1964, and his and Hacker's relationship with Bob Folsom, an ex-con and streetwise survivor from the South. Finally, Delany also details in *Motion* the planning and writing of the three novels that became his trilogy, *The Fall of the Towers*, framing those processes within his personal and intellectual life amid the burgeoning aesthetic and political avant-gardes of post-"Beat" New York.

While this synopsis suggests the potential readerships the autobiography might address, it does not begin to reflect the complexities of its structures, motivations, or the intricate relations of theory and practice the text concretizes. *Motion*, moreover, may bewilder science fiction fans, gay activists, or anyone whose partisan investments in isolated aspects of Delany's cultural "identity" might support the readerly expectations of the autobiographical contract that *Motion* refuses to honor.

As a black gay writer of "genre fiction," Delany has experienced life through multiple marginalized positions. By writing *Motion*, Delany thus assumes an enunciative position traditionally foreclosed from him according to

---

<sup>1</sup> Since Delany wrote *Motion*, a fragment of the *Voyage, Orestes!* manuscript was found, and was published in 2019.

the policed epistemologies of the genre's white patriarchal male history. He diagnoses "the notion that any . . . [of his marginalized subject positions, i.e. black, gay, science fiction writer] might be irrelevant categories—either of human experience or as a position from which to observe our society, comment on it, and to write" as "a kind of disarticulating embarrassment reveling in its own discomfort before any and every social difference that constitutes our society, a discomfort before the whole range of socially forced distinctions—not to mention a discomfort before any attempt to oppose that enforcement, at whatever level of complexity" (Delany, "Toto" 72-73).<sup>2</sup>

In asserting the legitimacy of each of his marginalized subject positions, Delany does not claim for any one of them an essence or an authenticity, nor does he replace the hegemonic self with a marginal self of similar metaphysical certainty. Furthermore, Delany refuses to grant his counterhistories the "Truth" status claimed by the dominant "History" they displace. Delany's textual practices thus transgress not only hegemonic constraints on public discourse but also some of the implicit protocols of certain traditions of counterhegemonic representation.

Much of Delany's speculative fiction reflects or in some way demonstrates his non-utopian belief in the "fragmented subject" that "is at its healthiest, happiest, and most creative precisely at those times where society and economies contrive (1) to make questions of unity and centeredness irrelevant, and (2) to distance that subject as much as possible from such oppressions" (Delany, *Stars* 378). Although Delany made this claim in the afterword to his science fiction novel *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*, in this essay I argue that Delany's post-Cartesian theories of the subject are even more radically realized as practice in *The Motion of Light on Water*. Delany's critical attitude also extends to history, which he sees as an ongoing narrative project. Herein lie both the major differences as well as the grounds for comparing these texts of Delany and Symonds. In addressing his nervous breakdown, Delany attributes his recovery in part to a narrative insistence on revealing the "harder stories," and a desire to proclaim those points of marginalization whose secrecy had been psychically devastating. Conversely, Symonds' gift for encoding his desires in figures from European cultural history allowed him his career and his

---

<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Allen Tucker reminds us that "autobiography is central to the tradition of African American literature," for reasons that include "the need to create and maintain black history" (179-80). Delany's assertion about the exclusion of black voices from the position of authority in dominant discourse does not disavow this tradition. Those writers were also taking on that challenge, in other historical contexts.

life. In reading these memoirs, the critical reader may appreciate the difference in narrative strategies between *Motion*'s interhistorical moments that frame the experience of the 1963 Delany from the perspective of the post-Stonewall narrating "I," and the gradual development of a self-certain "I" over a linear chronology (rendered largely without intervention from the narrating "I") of the eventually more sexually liberated Symonds.

After a brief appreciation of Symonds' encoded writing, I will compare a scene from *The Memoirs* with a roughly analogous scene in *The Motion of Light on Water*. Through this joint reading, I hope to make it clear that what is radical about the latter is *not* necessarily Delany's "acceptance" of the homosexuality he encounters per se, but the interrogation to which he subjects the historical unspeakability of that encounter. This shift in emphasis suggests a pattern that will prove to be structurally significant for the autobiography as a whole. What is radical in *Motion* is not necessarily *the events* recounted, but *the narrative strategies* deployed in response to the scrutiny he applies to those events. It is not *the knowledge* of the events the narrative imparts that will radicalize the reading and the reader, but the *self-critical epistemologies* the narrative puts into operation.

## I. Unspeakable Encounters

Known as a literary scholar, art historian, translator, and poet, John Addington Symonds (1840-93) is remembered primarily for his seven-volume work *The Renaissance in Italy*. He earned a posthumous place in the history of modern sexuality and in the emergence of a homophile movement, for *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (published privately in 1883 in a run of only ten copies) and *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891), both of which addressed the need for more rational and tolerant attitudes to male homosexuality. In 1890 he began a clandestine collaboration through correspondence with Havelock Ellis for *Sexual Inversion*, the first volume of Ellis's projected *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*. Symonds sent the heterosexual sexologist letters describing his desires and life, entrusting these secrets to a medical man whose authority and status might ease the legal machinery moving cruelly against inverts. Symonds' own memories of his earliest sexual desires became one of the case histories in *Sexual Inversion*, although Symonds did not live to see its publication and Ellis had Symonds' name removed from all editions after the first. Between 1889-91

Symonds wrote *The Memoirs*, which focused on his sexual desires and the effects of their social repression on his life and health. He stipulated that this text could not be published or even made available to scholars until fifty years after his death, and indeed it was not published until 1984.

Both *The Memoirs of J. A. Symonds* and *The Motion of Light on Water* are, among other things, responses to the suppression of male homosexuality in the writers' respective societies. Both writers seek to describe and to surmount the cognitive dissonance between the lived experience of homosexual and gay men and the complete exclusion of that range of experience from legitimate discourse. These personal histories are at once testimonials concerning the consequences of the "unspeakability" of the writer's desire and attempts to elucidate that unspeakability. But the variations in Symonds' and Delany's reactions to the spectacle of consummated homosexual desire illuminate the cultural and political differences in each writer's conception of the subject and the subject's relation to experience and history.

## II. The Silence of the Epiphany

In 1891, while Symonds was in the final stages of writing *The Memoirs*, he accompanied five Swiss athletes on a train journey from Davos to Geneva, where the Turnfest would be held. His account, later included in a collection of essays written with his daughter Margaret, showcases his virtuosity in encoding homoerotic perceptions of the world that could elude the sanctions against its expression. On the second day, nearly six hundred more athletes from other cantons board the train (Symonds and Symonds 222-23). Symonds describes the camaraderie of the groups and the landscape as it rushes by, but slows the description down at a point where environment and company merge in a poetic Gestalt:

At Palezieux the descent becomes rapid; and soon we glided into that azure of Lemman Lake, which Byron called 'as beautiful as a dream.' A symphony of blues, the amethystine hills, the fiery sapphire of the upper sky, the clear, pure breath of sleeping water. At Nyon, all Mont Blanc hove into sight, deploying pinnacle and snow-field in a mighty pyramid. The gymnasts gathered to the windows, clung upon the steps outside, saluting the monarch of

mountains with three volleyed cheers. . . . Indeed, our men and boys were made to spoil nothing that is beautiful in nature. They added to those spreading landscape lines, to that aerial colouration, the subtler, keener accents of man's living form divine. (227)

The landscape becomes not only the sublime, but the recent cultural history of the sublime. As the train descends into the valley, Byron is invoked as Lake Lemman appears. Although the line quoted is quite prosaic, the lake conjures canto 3 of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*:

Lake Lemman woos me with its crystal face,  
The mirror where the stars and mountains view  
The stillness of their aspect in each trace  
Its clear depth yields of their far height and hue . . . (645-48)

And then the Mont Blanc of Shelley reveals itself: "Mont Blanc yet gleams on high: the power is there, / The still and solemn power of many sights"(qtd. in Symonds and Symonds 228).<sup>3</sup> The athletes, in their power and beauty, pay homage to Mont Blanc, almost as if identifying with its transrational aura. Symonds writes in great detail of the athletes on display in the Turnfest, and details several encounters with smaller groups of athletes in the days following. Symonds ends one chapter with a catalogue of detailed dreams he had in Davos. One in particular is striking in its own right, but also in its function to decode the chapter itself.

I am on the parapet of a huge circular tower . . . . Around me are all athletic men, all naked, in the strangest attitudes of studied rest, down-gazing, as I do, into the depths below. . . . Up these [cables] there climb to us a crowd of young men, clinging to the ropes and flinging their bodies sideways on aerial trapezes. My heart trembles with keen joy and terror. For nowhere else could plastic forms be seen more beautiful and nowhere else is peril more

---

<sup>3</sup> In his monograph on Shelley, Symonds situates the poet's encounter with Mont Blanc and the composition of the poem around July 18, 1816, the evening filled with "much conversation about apparitions," would eventually bring forth "Polidori's *Vampyre* and Mrs. Shelley's *Frankenstein*" (*Shelley* 90-91).

apparent. . . . I watch one youth, who smiles and soars to me; and when his face is almost touching mine, he speaks, but what he says I know not. (Symonds and Symonds 358-59)

Symonds published his dream nine years before the first edition of Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* appeared, and decades before Freud's account of dream work and his method for decoding it would become commonplace. In the post-Freudian era, Symonds' dream would be immediately read as a confession, since wish fulfillment had become a default presumption of a dream's agenda.<sup>4</sup> Of course, even if Symonds here offers it as a kind of prose poem, it is still subject to deciphering. First of all, Symonds joins the naked men, looking into "depths below" from which emerge young men climbing up the cables and displaying themselves on trapezes. The depths suggest both the original descent on the train from which Mont Blanc appeared and where the athletes revealed their affinity with the sublime. Later Freud's work would suggest the depths is a spatial metaphor for where the repressed desires and its object are relegated, although like the repressed of Freud, they insist on resurfacing.

Because the desire and its object are equally repressed, the objects take on the affect of that repression and the vertiginous thrill of their emergence. Symonds' heart "trembles with keen joy and terror" (his desire) as his objects, hanging on a wire over an abyss, are both "beautiful" and in "peril." And the youth, whose face swings close to Symonds, says something Symonds cannot understand. Symonds' failure to understand the youth's message could be read as an encapsulation of one's relation to a dream overall, in Freudian terms.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> In *The Memoirs*, Symonds expresses a belief that a dream shapes the psyche rather than revealing its features. Recalling a recurrent childhood dream of a beautiful young man bending to kiss him on the forehead, Symonds states that its "vision of male beauty under the form of a male genius symbolized spontaneous yearnings deeply seated in my nature, and prepared me to receive many impressions of art and literature" (117).

<sup>5</sup> I need to qualify my interpretation of the dream by confessing that it seems impossible to read the dream as it might have been read before Freud. My reading is clearly Freudian, although I hasten to juxtapose it with a speculation of what both having the dream and recording it might have meant to Symonds and his readers. Before Freud, this dream could be written off as a random "fancy" of the sleeping mind. And Symonds could have exploited that dismissal in order to use the dream as a kind of poetic insertion of his desire into his account, knowing that it would not be read as an unconscious confession, particularly because the "unconscious" had not yet been established as the key to dream interpretation. I also make this observation as a preemptive defense of my use of Foucault's episteme later in this essay. My dilemma of reading a pre-Freudian dream from a post-Freudian epoch seems to justify my admittedly strategic adaptation of the episteme in my reading of Delany's project.



It is a message delivered in a language yet to be mastered. The beauty of the athletes can be put on display, but their full significance cannot be spoken, or only spoken in a language currently unavailable. These visions are exalted as transcendent to resonate with Symonds' desire but also to remove them from a full explanation.

The dream, therefore, both encapsulates the serial experiences with the athletes in the waking state, and provides a key to their latent meaning. These moments were depicted as intrusions of the noumenal into the phenomenal monotony of daily life. The men are the corporeal nexus of a revelation whose awesome perfection exceeds textual representation. The subtext of this vision's excess is *not* the inability of language to describe it, but the narrator's consciousness of *the consequences* of describing it outside of the code of disinterested "sublimity" (and sublimation). The affect of an epiphany irreducible to utterance connotes in Symonds' text an iconic trace of *both* Symonds' desire (which is what charges the image with its noumenal intensity) *and* the proscription *against* its direct expression. The vision effectively and affectively stands in for both Symonds' homosexuality (metaphor) *and* its discursive exclusion (metonymy), as that which is *beyond articulation* because it is excessive to it and as that which is *denied articulation* because it is an affront to normative morality. The neoclassical apprehension of masculine beauty thus imbues the object of Symonds' desire with a sublimity that adds a depth to the "unspeakability" it accommodates. In other words, Symonds' strategies here preserve his experience in that sublimity, therefore not simply rendering it to the silencing of the oppression he recognizes.

### III. *The Memoirs*: A Reluctant Bildungsroman

Although *The Memoirs* is more of a direct challenge to the silence imposed upon his sexuality than his Davos writings, Symonds had no choice but to acquiesce to the "unspeakability" of homosexuality of his time in his insistence on posthumous publication.<sup>6</sup> Like *Motion*, *The Memoirs* operates on very specific narrative rules that require a reading protocol to fully appreciate. Although Symonds had long accepted his homosexuality and had been happily

---

<sup>6</sup> The policing, arrest, and conviction of men in the UK increased significantly in the mid- to late-1800s; Symonds was well aware of the risk. Ironically, the police attention to the "crimes" also maintained an aversion to naming those crimes. See Cocks 61-66.

engaged in a range of sexual experiences by 1889 when he began to write *The Memoirs*, in the text he seeks to understand and present the psychology of the young boy and young man he had been, through all the stages of his emotional, intellectual, and, in effect, political development. His account of his early days before and during his time at Harrow, therefore, present a Symonds struggling with his sexuality and finding rationales for fighting against it. Even though this is a first-person account, meaning that the narrating “I” and the narrated “I” are the same biological individual, the divergence of their perspectives makes the description of young Symonds a kind of free indirect discourse, a narrative style pioneered by Gustave Flaubert, whose third-person omniscient narrator could convey the thoughts and perspectives of Emma Bovary. Of course, the dissonance between the narrator and Emma was far more legible than the narrating and narrated “I” of the early chapters of *The Memoirs*, as was Flaubert’s ultimate disidentification with his doomed heroine.

This distinction is important to keep in mind in reading the first sections of *The Memoirs*. While assessing the psychological and ideological violence in evidence in the suffering of that young Symonds, it is important not to attribute a continued allegiance to that worldview by the mature narrator.

From his earliest inklings of his sexuality to his mature reflections, Symonds often figures moments of sexual desire as aesthetic epiphanies. He recalls at age ten being enthralled by Shakespeare’s *Venus and Adonis*, experiencing both an identification with and a yearning for Adonis (*Memoirs* 101). Slightly after this, “[a] photograph of the Praxitelean Cupid . . . taught me to feel the secret of Greek sculpture. A vision of ideal beauty, I used to pore for hours over [this] divine loveliness. . . . [This photograph] prepared me to receive the *Apoxyomenos* and Marlowe’s *Leander*, the young men of Plato and much else besides” (117-18).<sup>7</sup>

Such images, however, did not prepare him for the young men of public school. Young Symonds went to Harrow already aware of his sexual difference but was appalled to discover that his fellow classmates took such appetites literally and acted on them. In the dormitories “one could not avoid seeing acts of onanism, mutual masturbation, the sports of naked boys in bed together.” When Symonds’ “sexual consciousness was objectified” in front of him, the sight did not stimulate empathy with others who entertained similar desires, nor

---

<sup>7</sup> The *Apoxyomenos* is a fourth-century statue by Lysippus of an athlete scraping himself with a stigel. This statue is also central to Derek Jarman’s formulation of his film *Sebastiane* (143).

did it aid Symonds in accepting his own sexuality. In the activities of his classmates, Symonds saw only “animal lust,” which filled him “with disgust and loathing” (*Memoirs* 147). Confronted with the tangible reality of homosexual desire and its gratification, Symonds there upon “detested in practice” that which had heretofore appealed so deeply to him “in fancy” (149). The concrete possibility of sexual satisfaction Symonds saw as an affront to his desiring self in the purity of its sublimations. During this period Symonds happened upon Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*:

And there . . . I discovered . . . the revelation I had been waiting for, the consecration of a long-cherished idealism. . . .

I had obtained the sanction of the love which had been ruling me from childhood . . . . I now became aware that the Greek race—the actual historical Greeks of antiquity—treated this love seriously, invested it with moral charm, endowed it with sublimity. (152)

Through his conception of Greek moral seriousness and Platonic erotic idealism, Symonds reconciled his desire with his horror at the prospect of its consummation. The “unspeakability” of his sexual desire, therefore, conjoins Symonds’ apprehension of the immaterial sublimity of the Hellenic male homoerotic ideal and his revulsion at the fleshly escapades of his classmates. Symonds’ Platonic overvaluation of homoerotic desire as a longing for transcendence instills in him a revulsion of physically realized homosexuality as great as the aversion heterosexuals are enjoined to feel.

#### **IV. Rapt Withdrawal**

Symonds’ account of his discoveries at Harrow is not a straightforward chronicle of encounter and recoil. The narrative presentation itself is a kind of withdrawal from the situation it presents. None of the sections in *The Memoirs* dealing with the sexual spectacles at Harrow treat a specific, individual incident, with distinct temporal markers. Instead, these scenes are evoked in narrative overviews, synopses that describe repeated patterns of behavior, abstracted tendencies, and repetitive actions of nearly generic agents. This technique has two advantages: it seems to provide an exhaustive description of the “truth” of

what happened, and it literally dis-locates the narrator from the narrated experience. For example, Symonds writes: “One would see boys debase themselves nightly” and “[e]verywhere one looked the spectacle of wanton lust affronted one’s eyes” (*Memoirs* 147). Such statements attest to what Symonds had witnessed without situating himself personally in the act of witnessing, and thus never within reach of the temptation before him. Symonds inventories what he had observed, but he never places himself within the *scene* of what he had *seen*.

In the orgiastic dormitories Symonds was an interiority under siege, a psychologically and spiritually defenseless witness to the unspeakable realizations of his fantasies. The *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, however, transport Symonds’ inner “I” to a dimension as removed from the site of physical *eros* as the narrating “I” is removed from the world it narrates. The intrapsychic refuge of the Platonic dialogues becomes the definitive hyperbolic distance into which the unhappy witness retreats. Pre-, post-, or para-Plato, the narrative epistemology of this section of *The Memoirs* is structured around two absolute polarities: the observed and the observer; the materiality of the observed and the purely psychical being of the uninvolved observer.

Symonds’ account thus evinces an adherence to the epistemological centrality of the Cartesian *cogito*, and the distant observer’s mastery over the object of observation imagined as the domination of the spiritual over the corporeal. The unnarrated “I” (Symonds in the dormitory at the moment of the sexual games) merges with the narrating “I” (the author of *The Memoirs* recollecting it as he writes years later), gazing masterfully from nowhere at the corrupt fleshly world that offers itself to be seen by the unimplicated and always-absent witness.

## V. A Contrary Witness

A similar act of witnessing triggered very different responses from Samuel R. Delany. He had been having anonymous and semi-anonymous sexual contacts with men in public lavatories, the docks, truck stops, and other public venues for several years, when one night in 1963 he visited his first gay bathhouse, the St. Marks. Climbing the stairs to the top floor dormitory, he came upon an unimaginable tableau:

In the gym-sized rooms were sixteen rows of beds. . . . I couldn't see any of the beds themselves, though, because there were three times that many people . . . in the room. Perhaps a dozen of them were standing. The rest were an undulating mass of naked, male bodies, spread wall to wall. . . . You could see what was going on throughout the dorm. (*Motion* 271)

As it had affected Symonds in a dormitory a century earlier, the sudden visibility of rampant homosexuality froze Delany on the threshold in fear. Unlike Symonds, however, Delany “moved forward into it,” remaining there until “some time after sunup” (271).

The most pervasive difference between the two accounts lies in the relation of the narrator to the narrative scene. Delany's narrative situates the narrated “I” spatially and temporally. In moving from the staircase into the dormitory, Delany moves from observer to participant. Delany foregoes Symonds' vantage and vanishing point, when he traverses the threshold, the middle distance dividing the eye from its vision, and the “I” from its “others.”

Nevertheless, like Symonds' revulsion, Delany's initial shock was also a recognition of the unspeakability of homosexuality. But Delany's vertigo at the “unspeakable” sight in the St. Marks dormitory does not arouse in him either the compulsory abhorrence of homosexuality or a belief in the metaphysical euphemisms of the Hellenic “ideal” *homoeros*. Delany's first reaction to the visibility of the unspeakable occasions an insight into the mechanisms that produce that “unspeakability”—a very secular “unspeakability” that is neither ineffable nor moral, but merely political.

The politics of the unspeakable were played out across “a social split” between the sexually adventurous and the sexually normative, a division “much vaster” than any we would experience today. To understand Delany's critical moment at the baths, we must read it in the context of urban US culture of the 1950s and early 1960s. That period's

densities, its barrennesses, its intensities both of guilt and of pleasure, of censure and blindness, both for those who wanted a multiplicity of sexual options and for those who wanted clear restrictions placed upon those options, were grounded on a nearly

absolutely sanctioned public silence—on the forbidding of sexual discussion and the suppression of sexual writing.

(Delany, *Motion* 268)

Homosexual activity flourished entirely outside of the parameters of public knowledge. The range of possibilities, the venues of contact, and the patterns of homosexual encounters were never clearly described or registered in any channels of information. The only acknowledgment of the existence of homosexuality at all were reports of police actions against “sex criminals,” and even these accounts were infrequent and deliberately poor in detail. A newspaper report that “[e]ight men were arrested last night for indecent behavior at the Christopher Street Docks,” never mentioned “the hundreds who’d escaped” the raid (Delany, *Motion* 267). The news blackouts reflected as they helped to maintain the unspeakability of male-male sexual desire of that time. Delany adds, however, that the omission of the “hundreds who’d escaped” from the public record “reassured the city fathers” and “the policemen who made the arrests,” but they also “reassured the men who were arrested as well as the ones who had escaped that the image of the homosexual as outside society . . . was, somehow, despite the arrests, intact” (267).

Delany’s observation suggests that the “unspeakability” of homosexuality is not simply the unilateral suppression of an otherwise apparent truth that would have manifested itself fully in an ideal world. Its unspeakability, on the contrary, conditioned the modes in which even the men who indulged in these clandestine sexual adventures understood themselves as much as it determined and preserved the ignorance of the general populace about the very existence of such a sexual underground. This is partially because both constituencies shared a common conception of homosexuality,

a fifties model of homosexuality that controlled all that was done, by both we ourselves and the law that persecuted us—homosexuality was a solitary perversion. Before and above all it isolated you. . . . The myth said we, as isolated perverts, were only beings of desire, manifestations of the subject (yes, gone awry, turned from its true object, but, for all that, even more purely subjective).” (Delany, *Motion* 266).

What shocked Delany at the threshold of the dormitory room was the *visibility* of the number of men having sex. The scene jolted him with the “first direct sense of political power [that] comes from the apprehension of massed bodies” (*Motion* 267). Against the dominant discourse of homosexuality at the time,

what this experience said was that there was a population—not of individual homosexuals . . . not of hundreds, not of thousands, but rather of millions of gay men, and that history had, actively and already, created for us whole galleries of institutions, good and bad, to accommodate our sex. (Delany, *Motion* 267)

Delany’s vertigo at the threshold of the sex dormitory, therefore, marks the liminal moment of an epistemological break between the romance of the “isolated pervert” and the emergent political self-consciousness of a sexually marginalized subculture.

## **VI. The Visible and the Articulate**

A few years after its publication, Delany’s account of that night in the baths became the basis of Joan W. Scott’s widely read intervention in a trend in contemporary histories. She first focuses on the detail of the blue lighting in the dorm room that rendered the scene visible, and the impact that visibility had on Delany. But she immediately shifts the emphasis of that impact from Delany’s personal history to the process of writing histories:

Knowledge is gained through vision; vision is a direct apprehension of a world of transparent objects. In this conceptualization, the visible is privileged; writing is then put at its service. Seeing is the origin of knowing. Writing is reproduction, transmission—the communication of knowledge gained through (visual, visceral) experience. (Scott 775-76)

Scott then defines the centrality of vision in such accounts as the use of experience in new histories of marginal subjects, and warns that: “the evidence of experience, whether conceived through a metaphor of visibility, or any other way that takes meaning as transparent, reproduces rather than contests given

ideological systems . . . those that rest on fixed notions of a natural or established opposition between . . . homosexuality and heterosexuality” (778).

Although the principal target of Scott’s critique is the “experience”-based history, it does seem to accuse Delany of the same failing. I think it is important to distinguish Delany’s text from the kinds of history that may use his “experience” in the ways that Scott describes. Delany’s is not merely an account of his “experience” but it is an ongoing operation of subject-construction and reengagement with the processes of a counter-historical record. Delany is not a self-identical individual who moves through the decades of experiences he recounts. The experiences clearly condition his subjectivity in its transformations and its relation to the narratives of his life.

Furthermore, *Motion* is not focused on the visible, but the difference between the visible and what can be said. What Delany saw in the baths could not be talked about outside. He is concerned not with a visibility that liberates the truth in general but the unspeakability of what is visible to him and the mechanisms and consequences of that unspeakability. I have cited the difference between the visible and the articulable first, to distinguish Delany’s textual practice from the kinds of histories that might use his “experience” in the ways to which Scott objects. I will return to that difference, after my initial consideration of Michel Foucault’s episteme, in order to specify what adapting that concept might offer to our understanding of marginalized testimonials broadly speaking, and to our understanding of *The Motion of Light on Water* in particular.

Two Delanys occupy that threshold of the dorm: the young man in 1963, and the narrator of 1988. For the former, the threshold is a physical entry into a site of rich sexual opportunity, but it is also a vantage point from which he saw the numbers of fellow travelers heretofore obscured by the structures of the earlier venues. For the Delany of 1988, the threshold is the epistemological break between the trope of the “isolated homosexual” and the formation of a sexually dissonant political subject.

Delany’s account of his personal history in terms of a radical epistemological break suggests an affinity with the work of Michel Foucault, particularly with Foucault’s concern with the historicity of epistemological systems. Foucault explains historical change not as a culmination of an evolutionary process, but as a sudden rupture in intelligibility. Foucault’s “archeology” conceives of history neither as a coherent linear development nor



as the flux of a temporal continuity but as a series of discrete periods. Each period is distinguished by its particular episteme, which is the “total set of relations that unite, in a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, possibly formalized systems” (Foucault, *Archeology* 191).

For Foucault, knowledge is not a transparent human capacity, nor is it ever merely the “content” of a transparent mode of apprehension. The objects of knowledge, moreover, are not self-stable entities in the world existing independent of and prior to their acquisition as objects of knowledge. Both the forms knowledge takes and the constitution of its objects are sociohistorically determined. In the episteme “knowledge . . . grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection, but rather that of its conditions of possibility” (Foucault, *Order* xxii). The objects of knowledge are not merely “given to” knowledge but are constituted as objects of knowledge by the operative discourses and the relations among those discourses peculiar to that age (Foucault, *Archeology* 44).

The “fifties model of homosexuality” Delany writes of in *Motion* is the mode in which “homosexuality” was constituted as an object of knowledge, both for the public at large and for the homosexual outlaws. And it was constituted as such not by a decree from the institutions of law, medicine, or religion, but through the complex interrelations of those institutions and discourses as well as through the practices and subcultural institutions of the homosexual men at the time. Delany’s crisis at the doorway to the dormitory orgy room models microsocially the rupture in knowledge that marks the emergence of a new episteme (and thus a new historical period). That paralysis marks the rupture in intelligibility between the shift from knowing the homosexual as a solitary pervert to understanding the homosexual as a member of a political subculture. While discrepancies between the narrating “I” and narrated “I” are endemic to first-person retrospective narratives, the narrative techniques Delany employs tend to exacerbate the disjunctions instead of following Symonds’ practice of harmonizing or eliding them as in the Harrow section of *The Memoirs*. Delany uses the differences between the narrating “I” and the narrated “I” to give voice and epistemological orientation to the divergent epistemes he juxtaposes or sets into dialogue. In other sequences, the account of a chain of events gradually exposes aspects of the silent workings of the episteme of that period, while the narrative foregrounds the

dissonance between the epistemic limitations of the period of the event recounted and the interpretative capacities brought to bear on those events from a later historical moment. For example, Delany describes the pain and confusion he experienced as a young man from his dyslexia during the time before the condition could have been diagnosed (*Motion* 327).

Delany suffered not only from his dyslexia but also from the absence of language to name and describe it. Symonds also confronted the inadequacy in available language when he attempted to make a rational case for accepting homosexuality as a legitimate psychological orientation. In *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, he realizes that such an orientation had as yet no name that did not already condemn it: “The accomplished languages of Europe in the nineteenth century supply no term for this persistent feature of human psychology, without importing some implication of disgust, disgrace, vituperation” (*Problem* 2). He settles for the new scientific term, “inverted sexual instinct” as “neutral nomenclature” (*Problem* 3).

Delany’s contextualizing the incident at the baths within a description of the absolute silence imposed on sexual issues touches upon other aspects of Foucault’s episteme that I find particularly pertinent to the marginalized subject. The Foucauldian episteme presupposes:

1. A radical difference between what might be seen (the visible) and what can be said about it (the articulable).
2. A priority of what can be said (a system of statements) over what might be seen (the visible, or the “self-evident”).

In his discussion of Foucault’s archeology, Gilles Deleuze emphasizes its focus on “that determination of the visible and articulable features unique to each age which goes beyond any behaviour, mentality or set of ideas, since it makes these things possible” (48). The episteme itself is determined by its specific “distribution of the visible and the articulable,” the former being perceptual experience and the latter the discursive practices of that period (49). These relations were essentially understood to be “the primacy of the systems of a statement over the different ways of seeing or perceiving” (50).

This formula seems somewhat anodyne. What of the specific pain involved for those whose experience of the “visible” is largely distributed outside of the articulable? *Motion* details a personal history in which the

primacy of the system of statements over perceptual experience is a pervasive and persistent nightmare. In describing his nervous breakdown in 1964, Delany writes that

there was an entire counterhistory to my eighteenth and nineteenth years that, as long as I could not tell it to myself, could not bring it within the play of discourse, was, in its unsettling effects, threatening to bring the world of objects, actions, engines, windows, doors, and subway trains down around my head, and send me plummeting in an endless fall among them.  
(*Motion* 345)

The “1950s view of homosexuality” shared by the vice squad and the homosexual underground illustrates the cruel irony of the common observation of what is unspeakable. The secrecy surrounding the existence and extent of venues for male homosexual contact founds the very possibility of those venues, but it also maintains the unspeakability of the homosexual experience that excludes the homosexual subject from public discourse, from history, from any legitimating recognition.

While the operative discourse will always have primacy over perceptual experience, this does not mean that “the primacy of the system of statements” can ever “impede the historical irreducibility of the visible” (*Foucault* 48). In fact, Deleuze argues, that it is precisely “because the articulable has primacy that the visible contests it with its own form, which allows itself to be determined without being reduced. . . . The places of visibility will never have the same . . . history or form as the fields of statements” (49-50). This means that, while the “self evidence” of inarticulable experience may be excluded from the language of the period, that exclusion cannot erase those experiences or extinguish their potential futures. The very fact that statements can exert a primacy over the perceptual means that the perceptual will remain in excess of the language that has excluded it.

## VII. Glossing the Unspeakable

The study of classical Greek gave Symonds a vehicle for expressing a *homoeros* as a cultural figure while maintaining its deniability. In Davos, he

was able to use the real athletes of the Turnfest, and his own study of Michaelangelo, to infuse his sanctioned account of his “real life” with the vital fantasies that sustained his unsanctioned life (Symonds and Symonds 234-37). Delany uses science fictional worlds to elaborate a wider range of sexual expression than was allowed in the world-that-was-the-case at the time, a point to which I will return. Delany also used critical apparatuses of his fiction to introduce the episteme into his canon.

His 1976 novel *Triton* includes an appendix with a deleted scene that begins with a dialogue between two of the principal characters, Sam and Bron:

“You know,” Sam said, pensively, “that explanation of mine this evening—about the gravity business? . . . If that were translated into some twentieth-century language, it would come out as complete gobbledy-gook . . . my explanation would have been nonsense two hundred years ago. It isn’t today. The episteme has changed so entirely, so completely, the words bear entirely different charges even though the meanings are more or less what they would have been in—”

“What’s an episteme?” Bron asked . . . “An episteme is an easy way to talk about the way to slice through the whole . . . the episteme was always the secondary hero of the s-f novel . . . .” (Delany, *Triton* 332-33)

Delany’s exposition of the episteme occurs in an appendix to a fantasy, but a fantasy in dialogue with the world-that-is-the case. The episteme is the underlying principle, but the unspeakable is the consequential local effect for the marginalized subject whose experience is on the occluded side of the divide.

In an essay aptly entitled, “On the Unspeakable,” Delany’s analysis further underscores certain affinities between Delany’s work and Foucault’s; in the consonance between the conception of the “unspeakable” Delany develops here and Foucault’s conception of the episteme (141, 146-47). It is important, however, to understand the difference in scope of the two concepts. The episteme is constituted by the totality of an ensemble of institutions, discourses, and practices; the “unspeakable” is a local effect of that totality. The specific divergence between the “visible” and the “articulable” is a distinguishing

characteristic of a given episteme; that divergence *is* what constitutes any instance of “the unspeakable.”

Delany’s relation to “the unspeakable” is a demystifying empiricism: in confronting “the unspeakable,” Delany acknowledges its efficacy and the practical realities of its operations, while exposing its sociohistorical contingency and illuminating those elements internal to its dynamics that can also facilitate transgressions and transformations of the boundaries between the visible and the articulable that the unspeakable supports. In other explorations of the unspeakable in *Motion* (and other texts as well) Delany’s meditations on a sexual scene are never exhausted in the rapture or vertigo the vision may have at one time represented, in other words, these accounts do not transcend their historicity, but they also do not reify the historical moment.<sup>8</sup>

### VIII. Subjected to History

The first UK edition of *The Motion of Light on Water* included a text entitled, “The Column at the Market’s Edge,” comprised of a series of questions posed to Delany by Constance Penley and Sharon Willis. Delany responds to a question on history by citing a passage from Hayden White’s *Metahistory* in which White distinguishes five “levels of conceptualization in the historical work” (qtd. in Delany, “Columns” 557). For White both “chronicle” and “story” are “primitive elements” that nevertheless “represent processes of selection and arrangement of data from *the unprocessed historical record*” (qtd. in Delany, “Columns” 557).

Delany prefaces his objection to this passage by noting that it demonstrates “how quickly . . . the problem of the relation of writing to history becomes wholly covered by . . . the relation of historiography to marginality.” He marvels at the

untroubled historian . . . who believes that an ‘. . . *unprocessed historical record* . . .’ somewhere exists! For that is, of course, the metaphysical grounding, the impossible and nostalgic object, the hopeless and heartless lie that stands as the barrier against the

---

<sup>8</sup> Such scrutiny also characterizes similar scenes of the unspeakable in Delany’s Sword-and-Sorcery fiction. See, for example, Delany, “Game” 66-68, 73.

history anyone concerned with writing the margins must analyse, must struggle against, must all but kill themselves to overcome. (“Columns” 557)

Hayden White’s contribution to a 1979 symposium on “Narrative” held at the University of Chicago also raises questions regarding the relation of historiography to marginality. He again surveyed the successive tendencies in western European history writing, dividing them into “the annals, the chronicle, and the history proper.” The annals form is a “list of events ordered in chronological sequence” without any narrative organization. The chronicle, White continues, “often seems to wish to tell a story, aspires to narrativity, but typically fails to achieve it” because of a “failure to achieve narrative closure.” Thus, “the annals represent historical reality as if real events did not display the form of a story,” while “the chronicle represents it as if real events appeared to human consciousness in the form of unfinished stories.” To these modes White juxtaposes the “official wisdom of the modern historiographical establishment” that presumes that any historical account deserving of the name must not only “deal in real, rather than merely imaginary events,” and “represent events according to their . . . chronological occurrence,” but these events must also be “*narrated* . . . that is to say, revealed as possessing a structure, an order of meaning, which they do not possess as mere sequence” (White, “Value” 9).

Central to the thesis White advances is his attempt to recuperate part of Hegel’s philosophy of history for a materialist historiographical Imaginary. White finds particularly valuable Hegel’s insights into “the intimate relationship that . . . exists between law, historicity, and narrativity.” It is from this reading of Hegel that White begins his attempt to formulate a theoretical explanation for “the frequency with which narrativity . . . presupposes the existence of a legal system against or on behalf of which the typical agents of a narrative account militate” (17).

In the introduction to *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, notes White, Hegel isolates two distinct meanings comprehended by the word “history”: the objective sequence of events in time and the subjective recording of those events. While the potential for the latter is always inherent in the former, a “history” does not emerge from a society until “profound sentiments” such as “love and the religious emotions provoke imagination to give shape” to the otherwise “uniform course of events.” For Hegel, “it is the State which first

presents subject-matter that is not only adapted to the prose of History, but involves the production of such history in the very progress of its being” (qtd. in White 15-16).

Adapting Hegel’s idealist abstractions to a secular critical model, White replaces Hegel’s State with “a subject of the sort that would provide the impulse to record its activities.” And in place of any internal religious or erotic motivation, White looks for an external stimulus for the writing of history. White discovers this stimulus in the object of the historical investigation itself. In other words, the stimulus to write history lies in a particular kind of “reality which lends itself to narrative representation.” This reality that stimulates the emergent history-writing subject to write a history consists of “the conflict between desire, on the one side, and the law, on the other” (White 16).

Here White introduces a Möbius-like turn in his argument. First of all, the stimulus toward writing history is also the object of that writing practice, namely the “conflict between desire . . . and the law.” Secondly, both the history-writing subject and the historicizable “object” are dependent upon the law as a condition of possibility: the subject for her or his historicizing consciousness, and the object for its narrative representability. White insists that without “rule of law, there can be neither a subject nor the kind of event which lends itself to narrative representation,” a principle which, according to White, “permits us to imagine how both ‘historicity’ and ‘narrativity’ are possible” and to surmise “that neither is possible without some notion of the legal subject which can serve as the agent, agency, and subject of historical narrative in all of its manifestations” (16).

Bringing this premise to bear on the degrees of narrativity in the three forms of historical writing, White argues that “narrative in general . . . has to do with the topics of law, legality, legitimacy, or, more generally, authority. . . . The more historically self-conscious the writer of any form of historiography, the more the question of the social system and the law which sustains it, the authority of this law and its justification, and threats to the law occupy his [sic] attention” (17-19).

The historical subject is not merely constituted by the law, but is irreducibly legalistic. White is not describing a subject concerned with justice, but with authority. And in fact, White states explicitly that the modern historical narrative not only takes “authority” as a dominant thematic focus, but the “truth

claims of the narrative and . . . the very right to narrate hinges upon a certain relationship to authority *per se*” (22).

White’s thesis first runs into difficulty when he replaces Hegel’s State with the “historicizing subject.” This replacement does not prove a sufficient strategy for extricating Hegel’s “insight” from his idealism; neither does this insulate White’s subsequent metahistorical speculations from the transhistoricity of his Hegelian inspiration. Since Cartesian egology provides the default set of presumptions regarding the nature of “the self,” without any stipulations to militate against it, we can assume that the history-writing subject will be ordinarily conceived of as a stable, self-identical entity.

To trace the development of historical writing from non-narrative modes to narrativity, with the valences White places on that narrativity, presumes a uniform, linear (diachronic) progression of a homogeneous social entity. This model cannot accommodate conflicts (diachronic and synchronic) among elements within a heterogeneous social configuration. The silenced subcultures within the dominant order apparently do not experience a reality that “lends itself to narrative representation.”

White, however, suggests a loophole through which the excluded subject might insinuate itself into history, or at least might launch an appeals process toward that end. But the process is costly and not at all appealing:

If every fully realized story . . . points to a moral, or endows events . . . with a significance that they do not possess as a mere sequence, then it seems possible to conclude that every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events of which it treats . . . . And this suggests that narrativity, certainly in its factual storytelling . . . is intimately related to, if not a function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine. (White 17-18)

The unremarked slippage from “law” to “morality” and the easy equation between “moralizing reality” and “identifying [that reality] with the social system” is particularly alarming. In any scenario based on a definition of “historical narrative” as an attempt to “moralize reality” (18), only the marginalized narrating subject (and/or the community she or he represents)



would be the subject of (or subject-ed to, or object of) “moralization,” since the very logic of the appeal and the ethos of the narrative as that appeals process presume that the heretofore-excluded subject recognizes the dominant order as the locus of morality, or at least the final arbiter of morality and hence, historical validity. Such a premise is at least counterintuitive, however, since the material situations of marginalized groups and their absence from the historical record are in themselves indications of moral deficiencies or hypocrisy in the dominant society. Therefore, why would the excluded subject recognize the institution of that exclusion as the “source” of any conceivable morality? Would the Jewish historian in 1941 Berlin appeal to the current society as the ultimate source of morality? Does the exclusion of a story, narrative or report and the disappearance or silencing of an historian indicate a failure on the historian’s part to moralize his or her reality?

*The Memoirs* demonstrates the double-bind that White describes as historical narrative logic, in beginning his personal history by appealing to the prevalent morality and even to the law. Symonds’ “primary object” in writing *The Memoirs* was “to describe as accurately and candidly” as he could “a type of character . . . which for various intelligible reasons has never yet been properly analysed” (182). His self-portrait was meant

to supply material for the ethical psychologist and the student of mental pathology, by portraying a man of no mean talents . . . whose life had been perplexed from first to last by passion—natural, instinctive, healthy in his own particular case—but morbid and abominable from the point of view of the society in which he lives—persistent passion for the male sex. (182-83)

He hoped that his narrative “might render the scientific handling of similar cases more enlightened than it is at present” (*Memoirs* 183).

Symonds’ wish that his story “might arouse some sympathy even in the breast of Themis” (*Memoirs* 183), the Greek goddess of law and justice, marks *The Memoirs* as being both an account of and a response stimulated by a conflict between desire and the law, which is precisely the situation that White considers the principal motive for and primary object of historical narrative representation.

The appeal to the law acknowledges the authority that delegitimizes Symonds’ life. Symonds is recognized as a subject of desire only posthumously,

only after the death of the author. And he is not alone in the invisible annals of the would-be histories of this particular region of the unspeakable. An anonymous autobiography published in 1901, *The Story of a Life*, documented the sufferings of Claude Hartland, a teacher from rural southern Missouri who struggled all his life to keep his desire for men in check. In the text, he appeals to the medical establishment and the legal authorities to take pity on his afflictions, and vows repeatedly to God to do his best to maintain celibacy, but asks for understanding for the times he failed in his resolve. At one point he describes an intimate friendship that remained pure because the two men held on to their Christian faith. And even here, Hartland defends the depth of the unconsummated passion with a prayer: “Oh God, give to each human heart one hour of love like this; assure him that it is a foretaste of eternal happiness, and the knave, the thief will become a Christian!” (46)

Both Symonds and Hartland’s accounts of “pure” romances follow the letter of Hayden White’s law: both writers attempt to “moralize reality.” The self-subverting logic of “moralizing reality” by “identifying” with the dominant social order, leads both Symonds and Hartland into a double-bind by appealing to a morality defined by its condemnation of the desire they are seeking to historicize.

## **IX. Counterhistoriography**

I consider both *The Memoirs* and Delany’s *Motion* counterhistories. In response to the difficulties in White’s texts examined in the previous section, here I will extrapolate principles from Delany’s writings that describe the processes that condition *an always processed historical record*, his counterhistoriography.

Late in *Motion*, Delany devotes nearly sixty pages to an experiment in exhaustiveness, an attempt to recount in full the summer when he and his friend, Bob Folsom, hitchhiked to Texas and worked on shrimping boats (436). Delany admits, however, that “no simple, sensory narrative can master what it purports, whether it be a hitchhiking trip to Texas or the memories that remain twenty-five years later,” because of the “Problem of Verification and the Problem of Exhaustiveness” (491).

Elsewhere Delany describes the “problems of verification and exhaustiveness” as “two insufficiencies” in the relation between “language and

truth,” which have to be kept in mind by both the ethical writer and the critical reader. Delany illustrates them by offering a one-sentence story: “There’s a chair in the corner” (“Semiology” 52). The reader would have no way of knowing if this is true (the problem of verification), or if that is enough detail for the story to be meaningful—what if there were people in the room next door being tortured? (the problem of exhaustiveness). The problem of exhaustiveness also means that the writer’s selection of details is potentially political (“Semiology” 52-53).

Although he does not name it as such, Delany describes this aspect of exhaustiveness and its exclusionary effects in a passage from a 1992 essay in which he is commenting on the letters of John Addington Symonds:

The sheer bulk of John Addington Symonds’s letters . . . suggests a totality they do not, alas, possess. While it’s true that scarcely a month goes by, between Symonds’s fourteenth year (1854) and his death from tuberculosis . . . at age fifty-three (1893), that is not represented by two, three, or more substantial epistles, the totality of his life is still not to be had from these often informative, deeply moving, and frequently brilliant missives—if only because letters do not provide such totality. (“Shadow” 151)

Delany observes that the editors of Symonds’ published letters “seem to have been taken in by the illusion of that totality as much as anyone.” As an example, Delany cites the editors’ dismissal of Symonds’ own “later protestations that he was miserable during his school days at Harrow because “[t]he letters to his family written during this period contain fewer complaints than letters written by most adolescents away from home for the first time”” (151-52). I would add to this that this “totality” does not merely *mislead* the editors but rather *enables* them to control the meaning and “official version” of Symonds’ life.

In the “Columns” text, in which Delany objected to “the unprocessed historical record,” he offers two economies that are always at work in any historical account: valorization and exhaustion. Delany describes valorization as “the increased valuation of one object through the devaluation of another.” As an illustration of the economy of valorization at work, Delany contrasts a science fiction writer’s history of science fiction with the “academic” history of

science fiction, the latter of which, as he demonstrates, reads like “a history of Judaism” written by Christians (“Columns” 571).

The history of Symonds’ life story provides a terrible example of both exhaustiveness and valorization at work. In addition to the text of *The Memoirs* itself, Symonds left voluminous notes, letters, and other documents regarding all aspects of his life, entrusting them to Horatio F. Brown, a friend since 1872. Although Brown’s discretion was likely well-intentioned, both to spare Symonds’ reputation and the feelings of his family, what Brown did—what the oppressive standards of the time required—was an enforcement of the boundary between Symonds’ experience and what could be said.

In his preface, Brown stated his desire “to present a singular personality . . . mainly by allowing Symonds to speak for himself—to tell his own story” (ix). Having admitted to owning the manuscript of *The Memoirs*, Brown explained that he refrained from using it, because he “felt that autobiographies, being written at one period of life, inevitably convey the tone of that period; they are not contemporaneous evidence, and therefore are inferior to diaries and letters” (xi). This presumption in its face is questionable, but Symonds was still writing *The Memoirs* in late 1891 and died in 1893, which makes the writing quite “contemporaneous evidence.”

The insufficiency of exhaustiveness allows Brown to produce nearly 480 pages of a biography he declared superior to Symonds’ autobiography, without including a single instance of Symonds’ sexuality or his work toward more rational sexual education. David Amigoni’s study of Symonds’ relation to biography exposes valorization at work in Brown’s text. He writes that, having produced “a manuscript as a biography stripped of any reference to his specifically sexual struggles, what Brown could not eliminate was the sense of struggle and anguish that exuded from Symonds’s prose temperament.” His solution was to replace sexuality with religion, as Amigoni put it, “[t]he languages of religion and nature were then conventionally deployed translations of, and alibis for, the language of sexual struggle” (169):

The central, the architectonic, quality of his nature was religious. By religious, I mean that his major occupation, his dominating pursuit, was the interrogation of the Universe, the search for God. . . . On such a psychological basis it would not in any case have been easy to construct a thoroughly happy or restful life . . . .

[T]hat note of depression which marks so many pages of diary, letters, and autobiography alike, will hardly cause surprise. (Brown qtd. in Amigoni 169)

Symonds' entire life and the core driving elements of his sufferings, his aesthetics, and his clandestine activism are erased, and replaced by the very religious institution to which he never subscribed, and the moralism he had long ago overcome.

## X. Destabilizing the Narrator

Ironically, it is the very “contemporaneous tone” that Brown found lacking which intervenes in the earliest sections of *The Memoirs*. The section covering the years 1854-58 at Harrow, are essentially following the protocol that White laid out, an attempt to “moralize reality” by exalting the high culture of Greek learning in the British educational system, while describing literal *homoeros* through a disavowal of the desire that motivated the text in the first place. But this hopeless gesture is interrupted by the Symonds writing the recollection, the Symonds of 1889, who had abandoned those moral strictures and been engaging in relatively guilt-free sexual encounters with men in the 1870s as well as his longer-term romances, both unconsummated and otherwise, beginning earlier than that.

It is at the point of young Symonds' first romantic feelings that the narrator from 1890 interjects himself into the story of the tortured, chaste, idealist youth. One April Sunday in 1858, Symonds attended church at Bristol Cathedral, where his eyes fell on a choir boy, whose name he later learned was Willie Dyer. It was love at first sight, but his lone reveries this time were insufficient: “Looking at the boy in church, hearing him sing, dreaming of him at home, were not enough. For the first time in my life, I knew that I must take possession of the dream and clasp it” (Symonds, *Memoirs* 156).

Symonds wrote to Willie, asking for a photograph; when Willie complied, he then asked to meet. Their meeting becomes a pivotal moment in *The Memoirs* where the narrated time is made precise and the narrator's voice from the narrating time of 1890 is evident:

We met then on the morning of the 10th of April [1858]. Swallows were wheeling in sunlight round the tower. The clock struck. I took Willie's slender hand into my own, and gazed into his large brown eyes fringed with heavy lashes. . . . From that morning I date the birth of my real self. Thirty-two years have elapsed since then; and still I can hardly hold the pen when I attempt to write about it. (Symonds, *Memoirs* 157)

When Symonds' father learned of his friendship with Dyer, he convinced his son to break off all relations, not only because of the possible homoeroticism but also because of the class difference. Symonds' diagnosis of his submission to his father's advice, as having been caused by "the pressure of arguments from without, of sense of weakness within, and of conventional traditions which had made me what I was," reads like the perspective of 1890; as does the description of Symonds' decision: "I gave up Willie Dyer as my avowed heart's friend and comrade. I submitted to the desirability of not acknowledging the boy I loved in public" (*Memoirs* 177). Symonds' decision to disavow Willie in public occurred in 1859, and the feelings described may be what is remembered from 1859, but summarized by the 1890 narrator, who then recommends two poems he wrote in 1860 about his grief at the disavowal of Willie, observing that "they portray my state of mind in that epoch better than I can now describe it," because no "autobiographical resumption of facts after the lapse of twenty-five years is equal in veracity to contemporary records" (178). The real story, in its full emotional texture and contradiction, therefore, does not lie in a summary of an incident in 1859, but a montage of memory and reflection around 1858 that includes the poetry of 1860 and the "mature" reflections of 1890. As Delany insisted, there is no "unprocessed historical record."

One manuscript contains a paragraph immediately following the above passage that expresses how the writing of the memory of 1859 has affected Symonds in the moment of writing it in 1890. The paragraph was crossed out in what is considered the main manuscript:

Here I feel inclined to lay my pen down in weariness. Why should I go on to tell the story of my life? The back of my life was broken when I yielded to convention, and became untrue in soul to Willie. But what is human life other than successive states of untruth and

conforming to customs? We are, all of us, composite beings, made up, heaven knows how, out of the compromises we have effected between our impulses and instincts and the social laws which gird us round.

(Manuscript 190 qtd. in Symonds, *Memoirs* 188, note 50)

This passage is not only poignant, but also fascinating as an indication of Symonds' conception of subjectivity as being "composite" and not at all an "innate" Platonic soul, but rather the ongoing result of compromises between desires and social norms. This view of the subject formalizes a principle enacted by the multitemporal narration, which resonates with Delany's insight included at the beginning of this essay that it is the "fragmented subject" that is most progressive. In 1860 Symonds experienced a loving affection for another chorister, Alfred Brooke, which he acknowledges was searingly passionate, and a passion Brooke himself attempted to reciprocate on several occasions, but Symonds resisted (*Memoirs* 193-94). Symonds intersperses the chronology with textual celebrations of the sensuality he denied himself: a long prose poem on Brooke written in 1865 (195-98), and a blank verse adaptation of that prose poem from 1867 (198-201). Finally, the narrative of the repudiated romance becomes too much again for the narrating I who laments from his future imperfect: "Would to God that I had sought and he had suffered that carnal union which the world calls sin, but which leads, as I well know, in frequent cases to brotherhood and mutual good services through life" (203). This complex subject fragmented across times, experiences, and reflection becomes capable of composing a counterhistory of his past that appeals to the future rather than the law that continues to render his desire unspeakable in the present moment of his writing.

## **XI. Divergent Fantasies**

Even before Plato's *Phaedrus* rescued Symonds from his despair over the dormitory orgies in Harrow, during his much earlier reading of the *Iliad* with his tutor Mr. Knight; two lines woke "the Greek in me," a process that a line from Euripides' *Hippolytus* advanced, a realization of his "essential self" at home in the Greek ideal (*Memoirs* 113-14). Although quite serious about this mode of self-understanding, Symonds also played with it. For example, in the

scene of seeing Willie Dyer singing for the first time in Bristol Cathedral, Symonds writes: “There was no real piety, however, in my mood. My soul was lodged in Hellas; and the Christian in me stirred only, like a torpid snake, sunned by the genial warmth of art” (155). For one thing, this line completely debunks Brown’s claim that Symonds’ principal struggle was religious. The reduction of Christian feelings to a “torpid snake” is a multi-tasking metaphor. First of all, it downgrades Christianity to a detail of life clearly inferior to the Greek life of the mind. But in this context, the snake stirs, conjuring both Satan’s temptation to bite the fruit that gives the sinner knowledge of good and evil and therefore moral agency, and the genital signs of arousal for Willie.

To dismiss Symonds’ investment in a fantasized Greek ideal to a moral indolence, moreover, obscures both the pressures he faced and the incipient formation of a resistant consciousness. Symonds’ internalization of the Hellenic *eros* functions more like an inner exile of despondent survival skills than a capitulation to euphemism or an ivory tower arrogance. The interiorization of fantasy operations can be the effect of a political repression. Such interiorization occurs “not simply because ‘reality’ makes the fantasy ‘useless’ . . . but rather because the organized and instituted forms of interaction which comprise the social reality of the child’s world do not tolerate the development of the fantasy as free interaction” (Brenkman 163). Similar occurrences of socially enforced interiorization have “historically caused the symbolic field of religion to retract from its collective forms to private spirituality, and has increasingly segregated art from social experience as a whole” (164).

During the years covered in *Motion*, Delany was writing science fiction; however, unlike Symonds’ Greek literature, Delany’s medium was not a fantasy that led him further inward in retreat from a hostile world. As Delany has observed: “The discourse of sf gives us a way to construct worlds in clear and consistent dialogue with the world that is, alas, the case. Literature’s unitary priorities do not. And in a world where such an ‘alas’ must be inserted into a description of it, the dialectical freedom of sf has to be privileged” (“Science Fiction” 78).

Delany was painfully aware of the “world-that-is-the-case” and the deliberate limitations of available language to challenge it. The silences around his “counterhistory” brought him to a nervous breakdown in 1964. *Motion* details his therapy at the day program at Mt. Sinai Hospital in tandem with a



more complex narrative analysis of memories that were the “visible” heretofore excluded from discourse. Upon his recovery, Delany decided to write a science fiction novel about a woman linguist, which he later titled *Babel-17*. He wrote it through the winter and spring of 1965, when Bob Folsom was living with Delany and Hacker and sharing their bed in a sexual threeway relationship, a time Delany remembers as one of the “happiest” of his life (*Motion* 345).

While Delany was not as yet ready “to write a science fiction novel about [three] people who loved each other and shared their bodies,” even the earliest drafts of *Babel-17* “involved Rydra Wong, a poet who had just emerged from such a relationship and who occasionally advised some of the other characters—the three Navigators—currently within one” (*Motion* 404). The Hacker-Delany-Folsom relationship is also figured in “The Navigators,” a long poem Hacker wrote at this time. Several excerpts from this poem appear in *Babel-17* as epigraphs. Both sets of “navigators,” however, are messages waiting for a language to deliver them.

Comparing Wong’s reminiscences of her triple in *Babel-17* with Delany’s in *Motion* reveals what had been unspeakable in the fictive future of 1965. For example, this is the way the poet Wong describes one of her two partners:

He was slim and blond and wonderfully affectionate and drank too much sometimes, and would come back from a trip and get drunk and in a fight and in jail, and we’d have to bail him out. . . . And he didn’t like to sleep in the middle of the bed because he always wanted to let one arm hang over.  
(Delany, *Babel-17* 94-95)

Here is Delany’s description of his “triple” with Folsom and Hacker, as it flourished during the period Delany was writing *Babel-17*:

Now I spent the days working on the opening movement of *Babel-17* while Marilyn and Bob were off at work. Evenings I fixed dinner. And at night we slept together in the wired-together beds.

Usually when we finally went to sleep, Bob would have made his way to one side or the other, so he could hang one arm off the edge. . . .

Which was fine with me.  
I liked being in the middle. (*Motion* 399)

And here is Hacker's version, from her poem "The Navigators":

Real, grimy, and exiled, he  
eludes us.  
I would show him books and bridges.  
I would make a language we could all speak.  
No blond fantasy  
Mother has sent to plague us in the Spring  
He has his own bad dreams, needs work, gets drunk,  
Maybe would not have chosen to be beautiful.  
(qtd. in Delany, *Babel-17* 109)

Like Wong, Hacker is a poet describing one of her two male partners. Like Wong's account, Hacker's poem diverts any question of a relation between the two men. This process of open concealment is not restricted to Hacker's and Delany's domestic situation. The first epigraph in *Babel-17* is from Hacker's poem, *Prism and Lens*, which depicts the environment of Dirty Dick's, a gay bar Hacker and Delany frequented not far from the gay sex-haunt trucks "at the Christopher Street pier." The bar was a "haven" to "late-teenaged dykes," as well as to "Puerto-Rican drag queens," and "to a whole range of truck drivers from the yards" (*Motion* 232-33). But the "visible" of the experiences there is transformed by the period's allowable episteme, its "system of statements," into poetic imagery whose embattled sources are unrecoverable.

The poem's imagery crystallizes the description of an experience coextensive with the impossibility to render it directly legible. In the passage from "The Navigators" quoted above, the line "I would make a language we all could speak," might be an allusion to Hacker's working on Spanish with Folsom, which was one of Delany's fondest memories of their time together (*Motion* 409). But it also aspires toward a language yet-to-be, a language that would express what was still unspeakable at the time. Hacker's poem is at once a phenomenology of desire and a contrary witness to the failure of the language to localize desire's particular manifestation. There is a poignant tension between the experience invoked and the impossibility of its full expression, the

consciousness of that impossibility radiating from the beauty of the poem itself. The desire the poem memorializes is displaced by a lack that the poem betrays, a lack kept secret by the very poetics of its exposure. While Hacker's poetry, like *Motion* itself, lends itself to a Foucauldian archeology, in Hacker's case the confrontation between the "visible" and the "articulable" is not figured in the successful metaphor but evidenced in what the metaphor's success suppresses. It is small wonder that Hacker wanted to "make a language we all could speak."

Such an ambition does not remain in the margins of the novel. In addition to being a poet, Rydra Wong was an accomplished linguist. She was commissioned by the Alliance to break Babel-17, the code used by the Invaders, the enemies of the Alliance. Wong soon discovered, however, that Babel-17 was not a code at all, but a language with very unusual properties. Learning the language radically alters the poet's way of seeing the world (Delany, *Babel-17* 112-13).

The cognitive rapport Wong establishes with the world through Babel-17 cannot be translated into the natural languages spoken by those around her. Thus, on one level, Babel-17 is an experience for which there is no available language to express it, making it analogous to Delany and Hacker's dilemma. On another level, however, Babel-17 is not only the inexpressible experience but also the *means to express it*.

Delany and Hacker were fully aware that the language available to them would keep secret the very thing they meant to present. Thus the attempts to write their relationship with Folsom into the poem and into the novel *Babel-17* also records their failure; but the novel, through the notion of the language Babel-17, fantasizes the means of their success. The experience hidden in the poetic margins of the text is preserved in an inscription that conceals its own illegibility. As the core metaphor of the novel, the language Babel-17 serves as a catachresis for the language-to-come that would break the silence that the language of the time maintained. *Babel-17* imagines such a language; in its cross-epistemic poetics, *The Motion of Light on Water* writes it.

Although Symonds fashioned a language that initially withdrew from communication, and articulated a poetics that celebrated what could not be said through the very unspeakability his prose commemorated, those texts also preserved a tragedy illegible at the time, but legible now as a legacy of someone who died within the episteme that kept his life unspeakable, while writing towards the episteme that would allow his life to speak.

*The Motion of Light on Water* is an effort to engage the processes that make up a life and its meanings, a self-conscious critical examination of those processes and the means by which the divisions between the visible and the articulable can be traversed and transformed. The narrator of *Motion* is a contrary witness across shifting epistemes; Delany brings to the various pasts he revisits language that had not existed in order to restore to those pasts meanings they could not have had then but will have had now, and thereby enriches the present with these newly accessible and resignified pasts within the “web of possibilities” that comprehend the text, the writer, and the reader—a web of possibilities that is also changed by that text, that writing, that reading.

## Works Cited

- Amigoni, David. "Translating the Self: Sexuality, Religion, and Sanctuary in John Addington Symonds' *Cellini* and Other Acts of Life Writing." *Biography*, vol. 32, no. 1, Winter 2009, pp. 161-72.
- Brenkman, John. *Culture and Domination*. Cornell UP, 1989.
- Brown, Horatio F. *John Addington Symonds: A Biography Compiled from His Papers and Correspondence*. 2nd ed., Smith, Elder & Co., 1908.
- Byron, George Gordon. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. W. B. Conkey Co., 1900.
- Cocks, H. G. *Nameless Offences. Speaking of Male Homosexual Desire in Nineteenth Century England*. I.B. Taurus, 2003.
- Delany, Samuel R. *The Motion of Light on Water Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village*. Richard Kasak, 1993.
- . "On the Unspeakable." *Avant Pop. Fiction for a Daydream Nation*, edited by Larry McCaffery, Boulder, Co., 1993, pp. 141-55.
- . "Science Fiction and Literature, or, the Conscience of the King." *Starboard Wine. More Notes on the Language of Science Fiction*, by Samuel R. Delany, revised ed., Wesleyan UP, 2012, pp. 61-82.
- . *Babel-17*. 1966. Revised ed., Bantam, 1982.
- . "Columns at the Market's Edge." *The Motion of Light on Water Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village*, by Samuel R. Delany, Paladin, 1990, pp. 535-78.
- . *Triton*. Bantam, 1976.
- . "The Game of Time and Pain." *Return to Nevèrÿn*, by Samuel R. Delany, revised ed., Wesleyan UP, 1994, pp. 9-123.
- . "Semiology of Silence." Delany, *Silent Interviews*, pp. 21-58.
- . "Shadow and Ash." *Longer Views: Extended Essays*. Wesleyan UP, 1996, pp. 144-73.
- . *Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand*. Bantam, 1984.
- . *Silent Interviews. On Language, Race, Sex, Science Fiction, and Some Comics*. Wesleyan UP, 1994.
- . "Toto, We're Back! The Cottonwood Review Interview." Delany, *Silent Interviews.*, pp. 59-82.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Foucault*. Translated by Sean Hand, U Minnesota of P, 1988.

- Douglas, Alfred. "Two Loves." *Poets.org*, poets.org/poem/two-loves. Accessed 7 June 2022.
- Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Vintage, 1982.
- . *The Order of Things. An Archeology of the Human Sciences*. Vintage, 1988.
- Hartland, Claude. *The Story of a Life. For the Consideration of the Medical Fraternity*. Grey Fox Press, 1985.
- Jarman, Derek. *Dancing Ledge*. Edited by Shaun Allen, Quartet Books, 1984.
- Scott, Joan W. "The Evidence of Experience." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 4, Summer 1991, pp. 773-97.
- Symonds, John Addington. *The Memoirs. A Critical Edition*. Edited by Amber K. Regis, Palgrave Macmillan Co., 2016.
- . *A Problem in Modern Ethics. Being an Inquiry into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion*. Privately printed, 1896.
- . *Shelley*. Macmillan, 1895.
- Symonds, John Addington, and Margaret Symonds. *Our Life in the Swiss Highlands*. Adam and Charles Black, 1892.
- Tucker, Jeffrey Allen. *A Sense of Wonder: Samuel R. Delany, Race, Identity, and Difference*. Wesleyan UP, 2004.
- White, Hayden. "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality." *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 7, no. 1, Autumn 1980, pp. 5-27.