

*Black Mirrors and Young Boy Friends:
Colonization, Sublimation, and
Sadomasochism in Stephen Gray's
"Time of Our Darkness"*

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They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.

KARL MARX, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*

I. Approaching the Younger Man

IN 1988, STEPHEN GRAY published his second novel, *Time of Our Darkness*. The narrative is ostensibly the story told by Pete, a gay white male school teacher, about a sexual relationship he has with a thirteen-year-old black male student named Disley. The back cover blurb suggests that "when Disley turns up at Pete's house one day with a suitcase, it is to bring his white 'master' face to face with the dilemma of how to live honestly, compassionately, and courageously in a country torn apart by the violence of apartheid." This blurb is negotiating the distance between a marginal story and a mass market, attempting to frame and sell Gray's text as an ethical tale. What this blurb also suggests—perhaps unconsciously—is the central symbolic value of Disley as a constituent of Pete's tale. The front cover blurb of the mass-market edition quotes a review in which Kurt Vonnegut contends that the novel describes "real lives of South Africans . . . alive and personal." The irony—which provides the central focus of this paper—is that by the end of the novel Disley is not "alive," and at no time has Pete, the first-person narrator, allowed us to fathom how "real" Disley's "personal" life is.

In the first chapter of Gray's novel, Pete admits that he has "the need to chop everything down to fit" (2). Ostensibly he is talking

about his “hydrangea bush,” but immediately following his expression of this concern, he finds a “black child at the gate . . . [and he goes] to dispose of whatever it was” (2). To understand the production and control of this black boy within a system of representation, it is necessary to examine him as a discourse within the novel. As Edward Said has convincingly argued, “without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—[the Orient] politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” (*Orientalism* 3). This younger man as an object of discourse is subject to a similar form of “systematic discipline” with which he is managed and produced. Through a discourse analysis of the black boy, as younger man and as “event” in Gray’s novel, this study attempts to reveal how he functions in the older man’s economy.

My focus on discourse should not imply that the black boy outside Pete’s gate is only an image, a creation without a corresponding reality. This essay’s focus is not to flesh out that reality, but only to suggest where there are traces of that reality. What must preface this study is the assertion that the younger-man figure is always already eroticized and controlled because he can be; he is spoken for and represented because the older man is able to appropriate him for his discourse. This assertion does not condone Pete’s—the older man’s—fantasy, the authority that operates within this text; it only resists the illusion of any absolute authority. Authority does not naturally and completely reside within the older man, though he invariably seeks to make himself the “author.”

II. Parastathentism

The image of the younger man as an object of beauty and as a catalyst in “homoerotic” and “gay” texts is so exhaustively represented in the Western canon that a comprehensive study is not only unimaginable but undesirable. What proves more productive is an approach that looks at what Foucault terms “events”—significant moments in which the figure of the younger man appears and functions. “Events” together form what Foucault

calls a "statement" wherein the "archive . . . is the system of [the statement's] functioning. Far from being that which unifies everything that has been said in the great confused murmur of a discourse, far from being only that which ensures that we exist in the midst of preserved discourse, [the archive] is that which differentiates discourses in their multiple existence and specifies them in their own duration" (129).

Said, whose study of Orientalism as a discursive system of power is based upon Foucault's notion of the archive, candidly admits that he "depends neither upon an exhaustive catalogue of texts dealing with the Orient nor upon a clearly delimited set of texts, authors, and ideas that together make up the Orientalist canon" (*Orientalism* 4). Similarly, I am interested less in delimiting a canon than in exposing a systematic practice of representation which may be said to constitute an archive, or a system of knowledge. Through an archaeological process, I examine "discourses as practices specified in the element of the archive" (Foucault 131) of the younger man/older man.

Terminology itself could become a site of struggle for authority, given the relative nature of terms like "younger" and "older" man. Physiology is often a determining factor in the sciences for differentiating between boyhood, puberty, and manhood, but socially these borders can be concealed, occluded, or transposed. The term for difference between "younger" and "older" man could productively be configured as access to print, the potential for authorship. It is not one's age which admits one to the archive that is the focus of this study; it is instead the degree to which one can be produced and controlled by the older man. To call these older men "pedophiles" or "pederasts" would be inaccurate. A more useful term can be derived from Ken Dowden's description of the rituals which took place in ancient Crete, in which a younger man is "kidnapped" by an older man. He points out that Strabo called these young men "*parastathentes* . . . [or] stood-by . . . [or] kidnapped" (114). To "capture" the younger man in discourse, then, could be called an act of *parastathentism*, an action perpetrated upon a younger other, regardless of specific age.

III. Pete, His Hydrangea, and Linguistic Authority

The younger man in Gray's novel, Disley, is initially little more than a black student who has come to Pete's school "on a scholarship from an educational improvement scheme indirectly funded by the US Congress" (1). He is introduced before the reader is made aware of Pete's own difficult domestic situation, and before any crisis seems evident in the teacher's life. Disley arrives at Pete's house without parents. When Pete drives him home, he notes that "[c]ertainly there was no one at home to receive their curiously named son" (12). Disley returns to Pete's house the next day and proffers what Pete calls "the famous note" from Disley's mother:

Master:

It is no good for my chile in the township. My husband he is in single hostel. Myself I am wekking in Prospect. There is trouble trouble Master. My chile must keep in Saints Pols until everything is finish. He must follow a good education. Look after my chile until everything is finish. My chile says to me you are a good Master. I have a good jersey for him. Humble greetings—

Magdalena Mashinini (Mrs) (30)

Pete reads this letter—a note of permission—that essentially gives him authority over Disley, and interprets it as a discursive act of resignation, the price Disley and his mother will pay for his protection and assimilation.

This letter is also the first indication of Disley's own linguistic difference, a difference that must be erased. Language, both written and oral, plays a significant role in Disley's identity as reconstituted under Pete's tutelage; through this reconstitution (a product of the efforts of both the student and the teacher) Disley aspires to an acceptable "whiteness." For what Pete teaches at St. Paul's is Afrikaans—the language of apartheid—though he would prefer to teach English. What he fails to see, however, is that English is equally the language of colonization and apartheid.

Pete is the obvious dispenser of discursive authority in the novel, and his rendering of non-standard English becomes the mark of marginality in the world he represents. Trudi, a German immigrant who has taught for several decades at the school,

becomes another linguistic type of social displacement, as seen in these two examples: "Zis one you must read, I got it out zpecilly for you" (117); "'Zis will be a story very after your heart,' Trudi continued, 'because it is about a brovezzor who valls in love vid a tart, and all his bubils tease him, you know how they are'" (117). Even Pete's transcription of a soldier's stutter emphasizes the young man's speech impediment: "Th-that's just—grazing for cattle" (197); "Th-that's Mount Balmoral" (198); "Next week I go-go" (198). But perhaps the person whose speech is most marginalized by Pete is the young man who rivals him for André's affection. Prince's English is imperfect and often laced with Afrikaans exclamations, and his references to English-speaking culture are mocked. When he is trying to explain what was stolen when the house was robbed, he tells Pete that "they only took *Gone in the Wind* and *Officer or a Gentleman*" (225). Characteristically, Pete uses the accents and linguistic errors of others to assert the superiority of his class, race, culture, and intellect—his positions of privilege as dispenser of discursive authority.

Pete's narrative attention to locution only lapses with Disley, and this suggests a desire to erase Disley's "difference." Disley's accent and his "poor" English are recorded throughout the first chapter, though not beyond the point where Pete is drawn to him. When Disley is reciting a speech from *Macbeth*, Pete reveals that there is a difference between the transcribed version of Disley's speech and what Pete is hearing: "There were areas of Disley no teacher would reach. 'What bloody man is that?' He announced it like 'Wet very men is *there-t?*' There was a long way for us to go" (64). In less than six months, however, this thirteen-year-old will be capable of sophisticated utterance. The irregular evidence of Disley's obscured *parole* will always undermine and throw into question Pete's translations.

When Pete says that "[t]his was no longer teaching, but a mutual, never exhausted joint monologue" (124), he reveals more than he might have intended. Ostensibly he is saying that he no longer has to lecture Disley and is implying that they are involved in a dialogue. But he substitutes "joint monologue" for "dialogue," and this substitution reveals the hybrid form of locution that Pete has constructed for Disley. Just as he transcribes

others' accents, linguistic errors, and speech impediments to illustrate their inferiority, so must he create a new locution for Disley, a "joint monologue." In his role as a language instructor, Pete, the lover framing the beloved, constructs a white mask for Disley, re-casting him in his own image, subsuming him into his "monologue," which is redeemed by "joint" expression.

IV. Imitation and Fluid Colour

Before Disley met Pete, he had been left to flounder at the school, receiving little help, and, as Jenny Carter his teacher observes, if he is to fail "[t]here's plenty more where he comes from" (22). Disley is an almost valueless commodity under South African Apartheid, a system of oppression that values most those colonized subjects who imitate the colonizing subject. Pete argues that St. Paul's is an international school, that it will have students from all over the world, but there is no contingency for cultural specificity, or other ways of learning. The international focus of St. Paul's is only a disguise for the assimilation expected of their students. Frantz Fanon describes this desire for assimilation, from the colonial subject's point of view, in *Black Skins, White Masks*:

Every colonized people . . . finds itself face to face with the language of the civilized nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness. (18)

This elevation in status through mimesis is what is offered to Disley at St. Paul's and, at least initially, within his relationship with Pete. Under Pete's influence, Disley's status at the school changes, and he is "seen less as a retarded black and more as a brainy white" (180). Pete's influence has fathered a white mask for Disley.

When Disley wins an award for scholastic improvement at the end of the school year, Pete and Jenny decide that it is not only Disley's parents who are generally unsuitable for St. Paul's:

We reviewed the problem of Disley's real parents. To put it uncharitably, we could only think that should the Mashininis pitch up for speech day Disley would be done for. To him it would be an excruciat-

ing social embarrassment, to them an otherworldly bafflement. Were the chairman of the school trustees to approach his mother with a compliment, and she just to stare at him, the name of Mashinini would be mud. Were the managing director of Barlow-Rand to take his father aside and learn that all he felt a growing lad needed was occasional clysters with a cow's horn, Disley would no longer be able to hold his head up in civilized society. (232-33)

Pete degrades the Mashininis and their cultural difference in order to consolidate his own colonial position.

In a scene just prior to this, Pete has already justified his prejudice against the unassimilated blacks by making Mrs. Mashinini appear beast-like in her lack of comprehension and muteness. Jenny says she feels sympathy for "poor Disley, having that lump of vagueness to haul around" (187). She follows this with other derogatory remarks, all aimed at Mrs. Mashinini's size:

"That's why they're so fat! Because with the consumer boycott, they gorge themselves thick in their madams' kitchens!"

"Where does a black baby sleep?" I slipped in.

"And sick it up for their offspring—like pelicans!" (187)

The third-person pronouns and possessive pronouns (they, their) mark a racial difference that reduces the women (particularly Disley's mother) to stereotyped Others. But Jenny cannot conceal her own racist motives: "Jealous. That's what I am. That huge—blob—has a child like Disley, and I—we. . . . You don't have a child, I don't—and she has that total little black gem" (187-88). At best, Pete does not disagree, and at worst he offers the first line of a racist joke ("Where does a black baby sleep?"). When Jenny says, they "sick [the food] up for their offspring," he gives himself a narrative alibi by asking an ambiguous question: "How can you—?" (187). But not even Pete will expose Jenny's rants as racist, since he clearly participates in a colonialist perspective which segregates the child from the parents because the child has embraced a "whiteness" that the parents lack.

Disley's "whiteness" contaminates his identity, dividing him between his racial, cultural difference and the standards of St. Paul's which will make him desirable in Pete's eyes. Pete is ignorant of this contamination, this identity crisis, and instead admires Disley's good fortune as a colonized subject:

The point was, could the white world provide enough to satisfy Disley in life? Unlike most of my circle, he always had access to the black world. He didn't have to choose, for he could exist in both, have hair-driers and double handshakes. No one else I knew was that fortunate, had that much going for him. (127)

Pete refuses to see the result of his own colonizing influence on Disley and, instead, constructs Disley's bifurcation as an asset.

What Pete desires in Disley is his ability to traverse the border between two distinct cultures and wear two masks. This transgressive ability reveals that neither "blackness" nor "whiteness" is a term signifying skin colour within this text; they are constructions which function within the constitution of Pete's identity and his libidinal economy. He describes the social construction of black skin he grew up with in an attempt to explain his desire for Disley:

I was brought up not to touch black skin. Black skin was unhealthy, scaly like a reptile's, gave you TB. A whole country has been divided on that prejudice. When I was a child my mother pulled me out of reach of the nanny, feeding me herself, bathing me. (138)

"Blackness" then is a construction of prejudice; but if he accepts a touch of "blackness," he does so to justify touching a child sexually on the grounds of his "liberal" acceptance of colour. He is not "sick," as the rest of white South Africa is "sick with their aversion for black skin" (138). Pete's acceptance of "blackness" becomes a virtue, a mask for concealing the child behind the colour.

Pete no sooner uses his willingness to "touch" blackness as a virtue, a sign of healthiness, than he removes the "blackness" to "universalize" the body of the child, in fact, to make the reader think the child is an adult: "Do I need to describe the sensation that I experienced as the blackness went out of Disley's skin for me, and I felt the person beneath. All of him" (138). For Pete, Disley's essential self—his intrinsic "value" removed from age and colour—cannot be revealed until his "blackness" is dissolved and his childhood is erased.

If "blackness" appears fluid within *Time of Our Darkness*, it is because such fluidity allows it to function as a device of psychic coloration. When, for example, Disley and Pete first have sex,

Pete turns the light out and immerses them both into "blackness," because he wants to conceal more than his colour difference: "I switched off the reading lamp so that, if I would not see his tense, lean body, he would not see my overused pink nipples, my gathering paunch. We were more equal in the dark" (78). The darkness serves to conceal Pete's body, but it also reveals his fear of the difference between their ages. For Pete to identify psychically with Disley, he must blur the hierarchy between "black" and "white" and between "agedness" and "youth."

V. Consenting Youths

Pete seeks to dissolve the binary of age/youth by rationalizing that if a child is mature enough to be a revolutionary (and old enough to be killed by the government) then he is mature and old enough to be a lover. Failing to recognize his own double standard, Pete rails against the hypocrisy of apartheid, echoed in André's words when he says that you "can shoot [black minors] in the back but you can't go to bed with them" (33). When Pete finally has sex with Disley, he frames it within the prosecution of other black children by his government:

Why I write all this down must be pondered as well. I can record only the following: as hundreds of kids were being slammed behind bars that night, criminals twenty to a cell, asleep by the bell, awake by the bell, to be tried by the magistrate in batches of ten—I am talking about my country now—I crawled beside Disley, eased the hot-water bottle to our feet, and stroked his thin back and round his arse and paddled the side of his neck with my thumb. (76)

What Pete never seems to take into account in this rationalization is the underlying similarity between a child fighting for freedom from apartheid and a child in a relationship with an older man: each is subjected to a system of oppression.

Pete also tries to rationalize the dissolution he desires through a discourse based on physiology. He argues that this was "not a child, but a lover. . . . This was not a schoolboy, but a man beginning. I wanted to know more of him. Like a doctor, I should ask him to cough. . . . No child, no schoolboy" (77). "Like a doctor," Pete uses a privileged medical discourse; the truth he creates is strategic and uses Disley's thirteen-year-old body to

signify a maturity that exceeds its years: "Certainly Disley had been busting his considerable rod for the last few years, and producing bucketfuls of splash. He could have fathered a whole new generation on the girls at Saint Paul's" (78). The child is thus made father to the "man," at least in Pete's mind. He must maintain the illusion that there can be no better choice for Disley than himself, given his privilege, money, power, and position. He argues that Disley, this "black-skinned child had twice crossed town for this moment, knowing he would get it" (77). He conflates desire and "consent," implying that a thirteen-year-old boy is both conscious of his choices, and mature enough to be attracted to Pete for his own unique personality.

Pete conflates Disley's desire and "consent" in an attempt to exempt the relationship he shares with Disley from the social and economic reality of apartheid. The paradox is that while Pete argues that Disley is capable of informed consent, he also maintains that Disley is a child: "We were an adult and a consenting child, making our own world by our mutual wishes . . . only under cover of night could we emerge together" (123). It must follow then that not only does the ambiguity serve Pete, but the faculty of consent and the identity of Disley as a "child" each serve for Pete some psychic or libidinal purpose.

The illusion of consent conceals the possibility of economic coercion and, to some extent, glosses over issues of power which are inherent in such relations of disparity. Kevin Kopelson argues in his study of André Gide and Ronald Firbank that this kind of concealment is a type of "pastoral" project:

Gide is both repelled by the womanishness of sexual inversion and sodomitical submission, and drawn to a "pastoral" project, one engaged in by writers who would like to conceive of the sexual "apart from all relations of power," to see it as only "belatedly contaminated by power from elsewhere" (Bersani 221). In other words, Gide would rather not acknowledge the colonial context of his sexual initiation. (63)

Pete's seemingly "pastoral" project conceals the significance of Disley's age while it maintains that age's significance in the *mise-en-scène*¹ of desire. Pete tells Disley that "we white people won't let you be a man tomorrow" (206), neglecting to add that his own "project" is to keep him from ever becoming a man.

Pete's desire for youth and Disley's liminal state—no longer a boy and not yet a man—recalls the myth of Ganymede and Zeus, in which the beautiful youth Ganymede is made immortal through Zeus's love, but will never grow past pubescence; the implication is that, if he were to become a man, then Zeus would be made effeminate. Disley's "untimely" death in the end thus becomes very timely, and death becomes the ultimate castration of the other. This novel reveals the paradox in which the pederastic or aged subject finds himself: his desire and his power are ultimately incompatible.

This complex imbrication of consent with childish innocence typically operates within and depends upon the social construction of "blackness." For, when it comes to the white Afrikaner youth, Prince, Pete notes that what "he wanted was not a sex scene, but a home" (94). Pete betrays an understanding of Prince's desire, which he does not extend to the almost parentless Disley. In a curious way, he maintains a double standard so as to preserve Disley's difference, for he appropriatively identifies himself with Disley's colour, youth, and political situation to play out his masochistic fantasy.

Nonetheless, Pete's desire to be subsumed into "blackness" and "youth" is similar to what Kopelson calls the desire for "self-recovery" through "dissolution":

Yet Gide, like Firbank, conceives of love, and in particular pederastic love, as the dissolution of the black/white (Blanche/Negress) complementarity upon which it is also based. The pastoral mode of *If It Die*—the apolitical and nonpederastic egalitarianism, the *face à face* sexual preference, the attempt to pass himself off as non-exploitive, as something other than a sexual tourist—should, in fact, be traced to this investment in erotic dissolution . . . Love, for Gide, is self-loss, (white) subject/(black) other merger. After love, as he imagined both Wilde and Verlaine realized, comes "self-recovery." (66)

This desire for dissolution of the black/white binary and for being subsumed into "blackness" and youth are all part of a desire to appropriate Disley's otherness. Kaja Silverman, in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, describes the desire to be subsumed into blackness as "psychic coloration" (299). Pete's desire to assimilate Disley into white South Africa is complicated by his own libidinal masochistic fantasy, wherein he also identifies with Disley as a racial and "youthful" other.

VI. Catching The Blue Train

Perhaps the most significant example of this psychic coloration is revealed through one of Pete's memories that he revisits through fantasy several times in the novel. As a child he is travelling with his mother when he sees a black man bathing in the river:

This was how I first saw a nude male. An old-fashioned steel bridge over a broad, reedy river. My mother replacing the spoon in the marmalade. The coffee jerking in its flat cup. A muscular, thin-waisted stark naked man standing on a mudbank, a bar of soap foaming in his fist, white suds dripping down his armpits and from his groin, and he waved gracefully to us, flecks of suds splashing on his head and chest.

My mother clipped her eyes shut. "They have no sense of shame," she said.

I kept staring through the double glass, at his smiling movement, the silver reach of the water, and was never the same again. (34)

The *mise-en-scène* of desire begins with transgression and the black man's lack of "shame" with which Pete, as a boy, wants to identify. This scene also provides the opposite case of the desire to subsume age difference: here it is a child identifying with a man. The "dining car of a cross-country train" (34) serves as the space of "whiteness" and "youth" defined by the difference of the racial other—the man—bathing shamelessly in the river.²

The "double glass," if it is double-paned, is also double in its function of mirroring the double to himself. This scene is a metaphor or performance of Jacques Lacan's mirror-stage, which, he argues, is "*an identification*, in the full sense that analysis gives to the term, namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image" (2). Pete, as a child, looks prospectively in the Lacanian mirror at the adult he wishes to become: a stereotypical, primitively physical, sexual, shameless, black man. This tension between the white boy on the train and the black man washing in the river is based on a desire that is derived from the separation of the two. It is an antiseptic fantasy that permits a type of disembodied identification: disembodied because their two bodies—their two worlds—are still separated by the glass of the train car window. Pete's desire for, and identification with, the black man washing on the river bank is the

primary moment of identification which disperses into a pervasive fantasy that saturates the text.

When he returns to this memory again near the end of the novel, it is altered, and, through fantasy, the double glass (that is, the mirror) is shattered so he can take on "blackness," leaving behind his class and racial privilege: "I broke from my mother's table in the dining car, scattered coffee, toast, marmalade. So great was the force of my recognition the double glass shattered" (304). There is no longer a division between Pete and the object he desires; it is no longer that he identifies with the black man, but that he has become black—in fantasy. The fantasy of shattering the double glass also permits the return of Pete's youthful body, a kind of desublimation of his homosexual and cross-racial desires. The initial separation—between Pete and the black man—that the Imaginary relation entailed provided a limit to be transgressed. Ultimately, Pete has made Disley into a transgressive body—moving from culture to culture and language to language—so that through fantasy he may psychically imitate that transgressive body.

VII. Prototypical Affections

Pete is bifurcated, caught between two itineraries in his relationship with Disley: he seeks to create a colonized, "acceptable" white mask for Disley, while he concurrently fetishizes Disley's skin colour. The fetishized skin provokes Pete's nostalgia for the moment when he was a child on the train seeing the naked black man washing in the river. For Pete, black skin signifies a "shameless" body, a body that can express desire physically, without sublimation. He desires such a body but cannot give up the privilege afforded by his "whiteness." Disley thus becomes the prototype, the offspring of what Pete both desires and refuses to relinquish—his power.

Pete wants not only to construct Disley as other, but to become the other and thus to imitate the prototype. This desire is predicated on the need to desubliminate the body and, concurrently, to act out sadomasochistic and masochistic impulses. Silverman argues that for Said, "[T. E.] Lawrence is one of those benighted Westerners who, not content merely to construct 'the

Orient,' seeks to provide its best representative" (299). Whereas Lawrence recreates himself in the image of the other so that the other will imitate him back—what she calls the double mimesis—Pete's process is inverted; he recreates Disley into a desirable image and then imitates that image. Whether the colonizing subject identifies with his own "masquerade" (like Lawrence) or the image he creates in the other (like Pete), he is still, according to Silverman, "finding himself within the racial and social other" (299), in the latter case an other that also wears the (socially acceptable under apartheid) mask of "whiteness."

This socially transgressive body is finally a complex tool generated for the subject's consolidation of the self. Pete's identification with Disley for most of the novel is vicarious, just as though he has moulded Disley into a useful reflection of himself. This identification with Disley and Disley's potential as a leader of the oppressed Other conceals an erotic identification with apartheid. Pete nonetheless disclaims his privilege when he claims that, although it seems "quibbling and petty" to mention the criminal aspect of his love for Disley, "when multitudes starve, more are forced into removals before the blade of the bulldozer, but it is all part of the same. We were all living across the law" (133). In one sense, Pete identifies with those marginalized and oppressed under apartheid through Disley; in another sense, he reduces his molestation of a child to the same level as breaking the law of apartheid.

When Pete sees Disley within a context of other black children who participate in the revolution, he does so to point out what he sees as the paradox under which black children must fight adult battles against a regime fighting to keep all blacks as wards of the state, as children under the rule of white South Africa.³ Pete reminds the reader that in "South Africa the government killed black children" (13) and that under such a government Disley has only two choices: "These were Disley's previous school fellows, the children who had decided on Liberation before education—freedom fighters, truants and then vagrants. They were starving" (9). Pete points to the destroyed schools and seems to criticize these child revolutionaries for not choosing education but does not seem aware of what kind of education he, much less

the government of South Africa, is offering black youth. He says that "[his] life had been spent this far protecting such kids from the adult world, preparing them to cope with it, not defy it" (64).

Pete's pedagogical approach encourages black students to "cope" with the "[white] adult world" but does not reflect on the cost of such an approach: the racial other's split consciousness and the loss of childhood without the consolation of adulthood. With Disley in particular, Pete observes that at that "awkward age between boy and man, he didn't know whether to be utterly obedient or to have rights of his own" (37), but this is only mentioned as a disclaimer to prevent any interrogation of the sexual advances he is about to make on Disley.

VIII. Altering the Cock

Pete's crisis of identity—his nostalgia for his lost youth and his desire to lose himself to "blackness"—is precipitated by a weakened relationship with his long-time lover, André; they sleep in different rooms and appear to be more like roommates than lovers. The problems in Pete's and André's relationship pervade the text, and all other relationships are implicated in the complicated game of desire which they play. Ostensibly, the novel seems to be the story of Pete's relationship with Disley, but in one very revealing passage Pete confesses to André and to the reader that there is another story, another desire, running through this:

But why can't we have one relationship completely our own? We do everything by proxy—through Jenny and through the Prince, through even Disley. It's as if we can touch each other only through other people. I don't care who you sleep with; pray God you don't care about that with me, and I'm not even going to tell you half. Because it's none of your business. But it's only to get back in touch with you. You see? (274)

The proxy, then, is a body through which desire traffics, and any identification with that discrete body—its colour, gender, and specificity—is a narcissistic identification. The proxy is what Ellie Ragland-Sullivan calls an "Imaginary relation," subject to misrecognition and idealization: "As a narcissistic structure, Imaginary relations—be they between individuals or societies—are governed by jealousy, competition, and aggressivity, medi-

ated through idealization, love, and the rationalizations which Lacan calls 'misrecognition.' Although consensus between people seems to offer a guarantee of certainty and stability, Imaginary collusions continually break down" (174). Desire both traffics the proxy's body and identifies with it as an Imaginary relation, thereby deriving vicarious pleasure—the proxy is both conduit and mirroring image.

Liza is perhaps the first Imaginary relation that Pete constructs in the text, and it is not so much that he identifies with her as that he becomes her. Liza is not there to act as domestic/feminine proxy—she is on vacation—and Pete identifies masochistically with her role as servant in their household. Indeed, Pete's descriptions of himself in the first chapters all construct him as feminine, or more specifically, he identifies with what he constructs as stereotypically feminine: passive, accommodating, and loving more than one is loved. When Pete tells Jenny Carter that "[h]omes are maintained by those who stay at home and weep" (19), he takes on a role which has been defined by Roland Barthes in *A Lover's Discourse*. He becomes "something feminine":

Historically, the discourse of absence is carried on by the woman: Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction, for she has time to do so; she weaves and she sings; the Spinning Songs express both immobility (by the hum of the Wheel) and absence (far away, rhythms of travel, sea urges, cavalcades). It follows that in any man who utters the other's absence *something feminine* is declared: this man who waits and who suffers from his waiting is miraculously feminized. (13-14)

Liza is away on a tour of the Holy land, and Pete has assumed her position in her absence. He argues that "it had fallen to [him] to keep the house in shape" (2); on another occasion, he tells Disley that André is coming back and "[he] must cook for him" (6). Pete's identification with Liza as servant signifies a breakdown in his relationship with André: "All I could do was patiently provide the normality, hoping [André would] join me again; stay in my room" (16). Liza does not return to work until after Pete has already moved out and rented an apartment. This is not to say that if Liza had been present Pete's and André's relationship

would not have deteriorated. Rather, her absence provides a space where Pete can act out his identity crisis.⁴

Pete's relationship with Jenny, a fellow teacher, is nonetheless a crucible in which his usual constructions of gender are challenged. It is during what Jenny calls "a good hen's night out" (21) that the two identify with each other as "feminized" subjects. It is then that Pete identifies himself as the one who waits at home and declares through desire "something feminine." Pete eventually thinks that a sex scene between him and Jenny is her version of a "moral rescue operation, trying to turn gays into straights. It has to do with [her] own sexuality, both André's or [his]. If [she] was happy with Leon, [she] would not try to alleviate [her] misery by converting others to [her] way of life" (248). Even in the moment of seduction—where he is more like a child in his fear and inexperience than he ever is with Disley—he preserves a clear psychological distance from Jenny's body: "I don't think I can go right in there. Don't you see how funny this kind of sex is, that the whole of the human race has to crash around like this?" (219).⁵

Psychically, this scene in which Jenny is degraded and Pete's masculinity is affirmed serves to redefine his ego; masculinity is no longer something he must rely on an external object to produce. Such a psychological reading is anticipated and substantiated by an earlier sex scene with Prince, André's lover, in which Pete penetrates him. When describing the scene, Pete notes that this is "what it was all about—confirming [their] manhood" (176). He describes how he fucked Prince while "gathered inside [him] at burning point was anger, rage, despair like acid, rotten dreams, rancid desire" (176). Pete equates the act of penetration with a masculinity which finds its genesis in a sadistic desire to violate and humiliate, to dominate the abject, "feminized" object. Such "confirmation" of his masculinity enables him the freedom to express what he has been suppressing in his relationship with André: his anger, his corporeal desire, and his sadomasochistic impulses.

The sex scene with Jenny also reconstructs Pete's phallic power and irrevocably changes his identity. At first he says that he "felt vaguely used, but reasonably heroic" (221) but then reveals

that he has become “robust and macho like other men” (231). Strangely, he also describes this psychic transformation as having physiological implications: “My cock was a completely different shape now” (222). Pete conflates penis and phallus into one, and this process signifies—on the psychic level—an integration of the sadomasochistic object choice into his ego.

Following the sex scenes with Prince and Jenny is a second sex scene with Prince which seems to correspond inversely to the first two. Indeed, within the binary of penetrator and penetrated that Pete constructs in order to define masculinity, it is simply an inversion: Prince and Jenny are fucked in the first two scenes while Pete is in the third. However, a closer analysis reveals that for Pete all three scenes are imbricated—Pete plays out a similar desire in each.

IX. Pete Plays With Himself

Pete’s sexual scenes with Prince and Jenny involve parallel processes: the aesthetic desublimation of the corporeal body and the realization of his (sado)masochistic desire. Silverman says that “[Freud] suggests that throughout life the subject is able to relinquish a love-object only by incorporating it—that ‘identification is the sole condition under which the id can give up its objects’” (317). Freud repeatedly demonstrates this promotion of self-love in *Thomas Woodrow Wilson*: “Identification seeks to satisfy the instinctive desire by transforming the Ego itself into the desired object, so that the self represents both the desiring subject and the desired object” (43). This transformation promotes a narcissism, which rejects the other and privileges an Imaginary economy. It is a profound type of narcissism which Silverman terms “reflexive masochism,” where within “the libidinal economy the ego itself assumes the partial status of a tyrannical ideal” (324-25). This “reflexive masochism,” Silverman argues, “in its maintenance of the active, masculine position, can best be seen as a defense against the castrating consequences of feminine masochism. As a number of important passages suggest, it is compatible with—indeed, perhaps a prerequisite for—extreme virility” (327). Pete develops this “reflexive masochism” through an incorporation of the sadomasochistic object and a

continued identification with those he sees as stereotypically feminine and masochistic: Prince, whose masculinity is castrated when he is penetrated by Pete; and Jenny, who cannot escape a masochism which Pete considers "physiologically" determined. Through these "feminine" and masochistic others Pete negotiates his own identity and seeks to consolidate the proxies which operate between himself and André.

This reflexive masochism is performed most explicitly in the last sex scene between Pete and Prince. Pete confesses just before the sexual act that he feels segregated from pain: "Sometimes I feel I'm living behind glass—very thick glass, the kind you get for windshields or in aquariums. I know that others are feeling pain, out there. Inside myself—nothing. Something must break right through me" (290). Pete's segregation from pain signifies an inability to identify with what he considers the role of women: "There's something inside every woman that wants to be a martyr" (279).

He returns to the position of the abject, "feminized" other only after he has experienced and incorporated the sadomasochistic role. The last sex scene with Prince represents Pete's transition to an ambivalent identification, where he is caught between his own sadomasochistic and masochistic impulses. Prince is little more than an agent to this ambivalent desire:

"Prince—" I gagged—"just fuck me to death. It's your turn, see?"

"You haven't got any vaseline," he said.

"I don't need it. Just do it. I want it to hurt, badly." (292)

The most violent and abject part of this scene involves the two of them in front of a mirror in a reenactment of the narcissus myth. This myth becomes a metaphor for the psychic and erotic processes in which Pete and Prince—as Pete's proxy—are involved:

Then his face came up to meet mine in the mirror. He looked apologetic, and I winked. We were both covered in oil, stinking, snot dangling like a plumbline from one of his nostrils. He sniffed, wiped it on my shoulder. "Sorry," he said. (294)

What is held in the mirror is an image of Pete's reflexive masochism and desublimation of the (sado)masochistic body, both of which will signify a refusal of otherness and a final refusal of proxies.

Ultimately, Pete's (sado)masochistic body is a metonym of the larger corpus of the nation. His violent sexual experience with Prince parallels the violence occurring all across the nation:

This time tomorrow Jenny would be over the Atlantic, strapped in a seat, heading through turbulence. Disley had a cow's horn up his rear, funnelling herbs in hot water. What difference did it make? Others had electrodes wound around their balls, knife blades entering their ribs, stones crushing their foreheads. I had Prince, clasping me now so that my spine would crack. (293)

When Pete demands his own penetration, he does so out of a desire to identify with Jenny, Disley, and a whole nation of victims under apartheid.

X. Happy Endings?

In his attempts to create in Disley a prototype of his own ideal—an other who facilitates the dissolution of the age and colour binaries—Pete refuses to see his own lack of empathy and the effects it has on Disley. There is a flatness to the ending of the novel, a lack of feeling concerning Disley's death. Pete has recognized himself in the other—in Disley—but when he destroys the double-paned glass, he no longer has any use for Disley—as proxy or otherwise. Pete characteristically argues that this dissolution of the black/white binary is evidence of his "liberalism," but he has shattered the dividing glass so that he can incorporate the symbolic other into his own identity and so refuse otherness; his narcissism is finally absorbed in his white privilege.

Pete's psychic development in Stephen Gray's novel has required the use of proxies who have facilitated a narcissistic exploration of his own sadomasochism and masochism: an exploration perhaps predicated on his desire for a move towards a desublimation which would save him from his perpetually unsatisfied idealism. The novel ends after Jenny is deported, Disley is killed, and Prince is put on the train home, where he will have to join the army.⁶ These scenes signify the resolution of the process whereby Pete and André remove the proxies they have employed in the trafficking of their desire—the removal of all significant otherness. It is a process ended only by the development of Pete's narcissism to a state of reflexive-masochism. Although this may

be a "happy ending" for Pete and André's relationship, the cost to the others in the novel is great. By far the greatest price is paid by Disley, the proxy with a difference, who must die to fulfill his role.

NOTES

- 1 The term "mise-en-scène" in English translates as "production" but primarily in the theatrical sense, although Kaja Silverman seems to use the untranslated term to produce an ambiguity which could include economic "production."
- 2 On the train, Pete's mobility is another marker of privilege which is metonymic for the privilege he derives from his psychic mobility elsewhere in the text. My thanks to Guy Beauregard for suggesting this.
- 3 In one of the few articles on Gray, Shaun de Waal reports that "Gray has said that an element he wished to thematize in the novel was the proposition that the entire impetus of the uprising in South Africa in the mid-1980s, during which children assumed the role of adults and adults became, to say the least, vindictively childish, should be acted out literally" (240).
- 4 What is also interesting to note is the gender privilege which apartheid offers to a gay household—and perhaps any household—since apartheid provides the economic privilege of keeping household help. Hiring help can prevent either party from identifying with what has been typically constructed as undervalued, subordinate, servile, feminized work.
- 5 de Waal claims that "this sexually explicit episode is played mostly for laughs" (240), and that in "an almost satirical way, thus, Gray turns the heterosexual encounter into a symbol of abnormality" (240). What de Waal does not recognize is that all sexual relations with adults in the novel are constructed as "abnormal" insofar as the other is humiliated, degraded and figured in all his/her abject corporeality.
- 6 Prince is the only one Pete and André will see again, and this is only mentioned in a Persky-esque epilogue that affirms the power of the narrator: "On weekends when he has passes [from the army], he hitches to us to drink it up and play musical beds. . . . Mostly the three of us chaff around, being friends" (296). The epilogue seems frivolous and reflects the manner in which Prince's significance has diminished.

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