CHAPTER 10

Lesbian, Gay and Trans Bildungsromane

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Self and Social Scripts

For Mikhail Bakhtin, looking back across the development of the European novel during the Second World War, the Bildungsroman is a subset of a group of novelistic forms that mediate a relationship to the historical real. The Bildungsroman, for Bakhtin, is unique in its proper situation of individual emergence within historical time. Exemplified by Goethe in the fragment of Bakhtin’s work that has survived, it presents the individual ‘no longer within an epoch, but between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other. The transition is accomplished in him and through him. He is forced to become a new, unprecedented human being.’ For Franco Moretti, the Bildungsroman mediates the relation between individual desires and socially determined identities, necessitated by the proliferating instabilities that characterise the bourgeois epoch: ‘In all its diverse manifestations, the Bildungsroman has always held fast to the notion that the biography of a young individual was the most meaningful viewpoint for the understanding and the evaluation of history.’

These two related perspectives on the development of the European novel, though fifty years lie between them, share a common reduction. They idealise an individual for whom gendersex is not fully a component of social struggle.

This reduction becomes most obvious in Moretti’s reading of Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre, a novel he determines to be ‘infantile’ and ‘fairy-tale-like’ (187). For Moretti, Jane’s flight from Thornfield is not a stage on her journey to self, her experience of competing narratives of femininity and intellectual life, but a specifically English failure of the novelistic form.

‘Any Bildungsroman worthy of the name would have had Jane remain among the needles of Thornfield . . . facing the imperfect, debatable and perhaps incorrect nature of each fundamental ethical choice’ (188). The implication is clear: ‘fundamental ethical choices’ do not include the
preservation of self in the face of violent sexual power. For without Jane’s flight, we would not see her refusal of St John Rivers and imperial evangelicalism, we would not see her absolute refusal to subordinate her own sexual fulfilment to manifest destiny.

And so, as feminist critics pointed out throughout the 1980s and 1990s, there is another framework for tracing the history of the European Bildungsroman, and that framework is gendersex. From the seventeenth century, the discursive formation of new, secularised nations requires the definition of individual citizens. These individuals are written from the start as subjects of will and desire. Over the next hundred years, as the novel develops, both bodily and consumer desires form its central organising tensions. The European novel takes up ideas of self-development in precisely the historical period during which heterosexual gendering takes on an increasingly central importance in culture. In the later eighteenth century, as Michel Foucault has famously pointed out, economies and their organisation in the family are increasingly structured through sexuality. Desire as a first principle in excess of organising structures becomes both the impetus to conformity and the threat to social complacency. Both of these are expressed through the novelistic romance plot which develops in this period. Lorna Ellis posits:

an alternative genealogy for the Bildungsroman based on early eighteenth-century amatory fiction. Just as looking at the picaresque tradition emphasizes . . . independence and mobility . . . a consideration of amatory fiction and the romance tradition to which it belongs leads to a better understanding of the social strategies, including manipulation, that characterize the Bildungsroman heroine’s negotiation with social expectations. In failing to recognize the links between the female Bildungsroman and the romance tradition, critics have also more easily missed the possible subversion in the Bildungsroman heroine’s remaking of herself to fit societal expectations.

Here, in allying the romance to the Bildungsroman, Ellis emphasises strategy, the subversive negotiation of the sexual self against the social machine. We could argue, following Foucault, that this emergence of self against social machine is modernity, and its primary site of negotiation is sexuality. For the centrality of sexual identity in modern culture arises from its very situation as the interface between individual desires and social structures. As Foucault points out in History of Sexuality, Volume I, the significance of the late eighteenth-century moment is that ‘the natural laws of matrimony and the immanent rules of sexuality began to be recorded in two separate registers’ (40). The sexual self within the body, travelling both
inside and outside of family structures, was now the dynamic location of the modern individual.

In Bildungsromane from the eighteenth century forward, we see a focus on proper and improper gendering, on negotiations of femininity and masculinity both inside and outside the family. In women’s Bildung, we see an explicit negotiation of the self as desiring body. It is this that Moretti misses in *Jane Eyre*, this primary expression, through gendersex, of the relation between the modern individual and the social scripts through which she must make meaning in her world. So, we ought to trace the queer Bildungsroman to its roots in the women’s romance, that first articulation of the modern individual who traverses the social world in search of a way to make sense of her sexual desires. *Jane Eyre* is a founding text for the centuries-long focus on Anglo femininity as a location of emergence for the subject of will and desire, and thus a privileged site for the articulation of modernity.

We should also note *Jane Eyre*’s position specifically in the tradition of Gothic romance, to which it owes its striking mediation of the desiring body. Gothic romance should also have its place in the genealogy of queer Bildungsroman, for it is here that the problematics of the novelistic body make their first dramatic appearance. The desires and terrors of the female body are boldly expressed in the Gothic romance, from Mrs Radcliffe to Charlotte Brontë to its current articulations. At the same time, as *Northanger Abbey* famously warns us, the dangers of novel-reading lie not in the novel’s relation to history, where it is superior to the dry productions of academics for its use of precisely those effects which Bakhtin and Moretti later celebrate. The danger of certain novels, for Austen and her fellow conservatives, lies in their excitement of bodily sensation. Gothic romance adventures represent the trembling sensibilities of the feminine body in startlingly direct language, but they also incite such responses in the bodies of readers. The Gothic body is both representational and direct.

Lesbian, gay and transgender Bildungsromane can be read through both critical strands laid out here. They quite clearly work to historicise the individual and her desires, posing the individual precisely ‘between two epochs’ (before and after sexual liberation) at the threshold of social recognition. They do this specifically by posing an essential, sexualised self against the social and familial structures of bourgeois modernity. The liberation of this self is constructed as the emergence of the new, modern relation between individual and state. Finally, they deploy those specific strategies for representing the desiring body and for hailing it which were developed in the Gothic romance.
So, the development of novelistic form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflects this context in which desire became a central attribute of the modern individual. It sat at the nexus of social order (the family), individual definition (emergence) and capital wealth (consumption), and it could unseat their ordered and stable relation. Franco Moretti links this increasing focus on desire to the effects of surplus production. Capitalism needs desiring individuals, individuals for whom desire is the primary location of self. ‘No longer subject to a pre-existent need, for this very reason production begins to increase needs ... It transforms them from “needs” – a term which evokes the static image of an always identical reproduction – to “desires”: which imply dynamism, change, novelty’ (165). These latter attributes, characteristic of modernity and allied to desire, are also, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, linked to those counter-currents through which an aesthetic model of desire, as subjective response, places the individual in opposition to the social machine. Together, these sometimes contradictory effects make that form of the Bildungsroman which focuses specifically on the development of dissident sexual identity a signal, we might say inevitable, form for the modern novel. This chapter will examine queer Bildungsromane through this lens, that is, not simply as a minoritising expression of rights discourse, but as a central and inevitable component of Western culture across the twentieth century.

The Modernist Moment

Bonnie Kime Scott’s work has repositioned the modernist movement not as a radical engagement with form, but as a radical engagement with gender. As Raymond Williams points out in *The Long Revolution*, the critical tradition which sees the early twentieth century as a specific moment of formal innovation in literature necessarily erases the majority of the novelistic fictions produced in that moment. Many of the works elided in the selective critical tradition which defines modernism are new expressions of the sexual self, or reworked expressions deployed in new cultural registers. While some novels central to modernism’s self-definition, such as Joyce’s famous Künstlerroman, are journeys of self-development, those novels most central to the tradition of queer Bildungsroman sit uncomfortably at the limit of the modernist canon. Their articulation of the sexually dissident self is embedded in formal strategies which place them alternately in alignment
with and in opposition to the orthodoxy of modernist ‘literariness’, posed self-consciously against nineteenth-century realism.

At the turn of the twentieth century, lesbian, gay and transgender writers strategically deployed existing discourses of sexology and psychoanalysis within the framework of the Bildungsroman specifically in order to pit the sexually dissident self against the social world. This strategy necessarily involved both a repositioning of the relation between self and social scripts which had typified the European Bildungsroman up to this point, and a renegotiation of the novel’s relationship to grand historical narrative.

The realist project in the nineteenth century formulated characters specifically as types that could exemplify the effects of particular social relations. In order to produce the sexually dissident individual as an essential ‘type’, the techniques of realism were necessary. Products of their taxonomical age, social-realist novels created characters that sat illustratively within categories, as types sit within organic systems. In its first, early twentieth-century articulation, the narrative which produced the sexual self needed to negotiate such systems, social, medical and juridical. This was the available discursive material out of which the queer narrative self was made, and thus it could not participate fully in modernism’s staged retreat from its referents. And yet, these sexually dissident types were not secondary, did not reflect or illustrate social relations. They were posed against those relations as essential and pre-existent. They staged a kind of triumph of the self without contingency, clearly allied to the modernist subject. At times, as in E. M. Forster’s *Maurice* (1914; 1971), this essential self is formed through the radical subjectivity enabled by the Paterian aesthetic response. As such it rejects the systematising framework of sexology. One history of the queer Bildungsroman across the twentieth century might trace the ways in which novels of the lesbian, gay and transgender self variously deployed or refused those non-literary discourses which systematised the sexual subject.

If the queer Bildungsroman needed the realist type, it also needed those structures of time, both narrative and historical, which characterise the nineteenth-century novel. In order to pose an essential subject as progressively emergent, a novel needs a sense of historical landscape. In order to pose that subject as pre-eminent, stable and radically opposed to its context, it needs narrative time, the sense of progress and closure as well the sense of expansive, subjective time.

But what of a novel like Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928)? It certainly produces a kind of journey centring on a sexually dissident self, and at the same time it refuses the bounds of historical time. In both characterisation
and narrative strategy, it refuses the unified individual. In doing this, it necessarily removes itself from any manner of instrumentalisation beyond the reproduction of its own position, which is performed by novels covering any manner of subject and aim, sharing only what Lukács terms modernist form as a ‘specific kind of content’. The formal qualities of queer Bildungsromane such as Forster’s *Maurice* and Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) mark them clearly as instrumental. They are made for use (though *Maurice* may have waited a long time for its deployment), deliberately ‘readerly’ in Barthes sense, that is deliberately stabilising and productive of identity.

So, at the moment when high modernism staged its radical formal expression of the subjective turn, queer narrative reached at least halfway back towards the established forms of nineteenth-century realism. In projecting themselves as instruments for the sexually dissident self, novels of lesbian, gay and transgender identity take, over and over across the twentieth century, the form of the Bildungsroman. The designation ‘coming out novel’ suggests all of those qualities of youth, instability and becoming which typify the Bildungsroman, and which Moretti argues say more about modernity itself than they do about the individual (5). Sexuality is itself the inevitable and privileged substrate for this expression.

Both Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* and Forster’s *Maurice* produce sexual dissidence as the form and the meaning of their protagonists. Working in the early twentieth century, they necessarily engage with sexual science as a structuring discourse for sexuality in their historical moment. Jay Prosser, in *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality*, points out that the continued reception of *The Well* as ‘lesbian’ involves a denial of its position as a transgender narrative. Prosser discusses Hall’s determined return to sexological narrative in a decade when most of Western culture had turned towards psychoanalytical narratives of sexual dissidence. For Hall, as other critics have noted, this is part of an essentialist strategy, a plea for recognition on the basis of innate bodily difference. Prosser argues that, because Hall modelled Stephen’s narrative specifically after case studies of ‘inverts’, ‘The Well is not only thematically but concretely caught up in the inception of transsexual history’. Hall’s narrator describes Stephen as an invert, and Stephen herself (Hall uses the feminine pronoun for her protagonist throughout the novel) finds her discursive reflection, identity and meaning, in a volume of Krafft-Ebing, found on her father’s shelf. Throughout the novel, we are provided with evidence of the bodily difference of
Stephen and other inverts, defined as biologically essential in sexological terms.

For Prosser what is at stake in discussion of The Well is the medicalisation of the transgender life narrative and the historical move towards operative transsexuality. In making these connections, he points to the connection between the narrative strategies of sexology and the form of the novel. We could add psychoanalysis to this, since its often-unremarked borrowing from sexology includes the case history method. The central medical formulations experienced by queer peoples in the twentieth century are predicated on novelistic forms of narrative, on the emergence of essential or contingent selves within the structures of the social world.

The Well, like its sexological sources, depends on both bodily evidence and life history narrative to produce its sexually dissident subjects. The biologically inflected idea of the natural plays a significant role in The Well’s characterisation and its plot structure. Being taken in to dinner by one Captain Ramsey, young Stephen reflects that ‘if I were he I wouldn’t be a bore, I could just be myself, I’d feel perfectly natural’.

The heterosexual pairing demanded by social decorum is rendered unnatural in the face of Stephen’s ‘natural’ difference. This idea of natural/unnaturalness returns at key moments throughout the novel. At times the narrative also gestures at a psychoanalytic aetiology for Stephen’s difference. Her father had wanted a boy; her mother is cold and unloving, ultimately rejecting her. Her mother’s womb is explicitly referred to as a hostile environment, a gesture at a notion of acquired characteristics which conflates a psychoanalytic narrative with a sexological one. Stephen’s childish desire for a family servant provides a psychoanalytic origin narrative to which she returns in reverie at formative moments in her development.

As Stephen journeys through Europe, her narrative of development takes her through several relationships and provides views of a number of inverted characters, and those ‘normal’ (that is, feminine) women who desire them. As Prosser points out, the model here is sexological; to term Stephen a lesbian or a transgender person is to read her out of context. The notion of the invert is predicated on what Alan Sinfield terms the ‘cross-sex grid’.

In a conflation of what Freud would later distinguish as aim and object-choice, nineteenth-century sexology often assumed that the desire for a person of the same sex was evidence of transgender movement. This immediately begged the question, what about the women who desired such inverts? This in turn led to a baroque taxonomy of degree and
inclination. The novel sets out to classify Stephen and its other characters through both bodily difference and life history narrative.

Stephen’s childhood identification with her father in the absence of motherly affection is dwelt on at length. Her experiences in war, family exile and various love affairs all provide the classic structure of Bildung, in which a radically continuous subject develops against a shifting array of encounters with ‘the world’ that form the narrative substrate of Stephen’s emerging identity. Its context is the biologically determined type. In the Parisian salon of a character called Valérie Seymour, widely accepted as a depiction of Natalie Barney’s home, Stephen encounters the ‘types’ with which she shares biological kinship. This forms one episode in her development. Here, the reader is pointed towards an array of specimens, and didactically taught to read clues which reveal inversion to the observant viewer:

There was Pat who had lost her Arabella to the charms of Grigg and the Lido. Pat, who, originally hailing from Boston, still vaguely suggested a New England schoolmarm. Pat, whose libido apart from the flesh, flowed into entomological channels – one had to look twice to discern that her ankles were too strong and too heavy for those of a female . . . There was Jamie, very much more pronounced . . . (353–4)

We are instructed to read through the social surface here. Characters are made of both detailed superficial histories and of bodies. These bodies are significant in a manner which conflates characterisation with individualisation, which moves inside the realist type and uses it as a reflector for the world.

In Maurice, written before The Well but revised and published long after, E. M. Forster is also at pains to render sexual dissidence as a bodily matter, directly physical before it is psychic. Forster opposes his protagonist specifically to the model of the Wildean aesthete, exemplified in Maurice’s first, duplicitous lover, Clive. The two meet at Cambridge, where Maurice encounters characters such as Risley: ‘dark, tall and affected. He made an exaggerated gesture when introduced, and when he spoke, which was continually, he used strong yet unmanly superlatives’. Forster works to situate Maurice in opposition to such men, who are openly effeminate and associated with particular aesthetic tastes, with a Cambridge subculture made famous by the Wilde trial when Forster himself was sixteen years old. Maurice admits later that ‘his interest in the classics had been slight and obscene’ (99). He is defined purposely against effeminacy, having in maturity, ‘a well-trained serviceable body
and a face that contradicted it no longer. Virility had harmonized them and shaded either with dark hair’ (102–3).

Though this is a clear rejection of the sexological narrative of inversion, which typically described male invert as ‘narrow-hipped’, the invert is not rejected in favour of a purely psychic identity model. Maurice does not live as a consciousness inside his body, he is that body. The failure of his relationship with Clive is written specifically as a result of Clive’s insistent separation of body and spirit and his cowardly desire to love Maurice ‘spiritually’. Maurice’s first ‘crisis’ of identity, his acceptance of his love for men, is followed by the realisation that he is ‘neither body or soul, nor body and soul, but “he”, working through both’ (60). Despite his lack of aesthetic sensibility, the classical cultural model still defines him. He realises that he had ‘always been like the Greeks and didn’t know’ (62). The cultural material of homosexual identity presented here is late Victorian – the mediation of aesthetic responses, the formative experience of the Oxbridge college, the articulation of commuter class identity against old families in their country seats and its concomitant new model for the family – but its narrative structure is that specifically twentieth-century form of Bildungsroman that would later be called the ‘coming out’ novel.

This twentieth-century version of the form involves an enhancement of the psychological fiction of the late Victorian age, an elevation of psychic interiority to mythic status. That is to say, it is to some degree modernist. While sometimes very frank about bodily desire, Forster works to situate Maurice’s radically corporeal consciousness in an amorphous, redolent interiority, established early on in a fluid and highly metaphorical focalised narration: ‘A trouble – nothing as beautiful as sorrow – rose to the surface of his mind, displayed its ungainliness and sank . . . he longed to be a little boy again, and to stroll half awake forever by the colourless sea’ (30). By the end of the novel, this diffuse interiority will expand across the nation and the world, taking its characters outside of history.

It is a characteristic gesture of Forster’s to allow his characters to escape from historical into mythic time. The final episode of Maurice bears a striking resemblance to Forster’s feminist short story ‘The Other Kingdom’, first published in the English Review in 1909. It also echoes that valorisation of ‘the holiness of direct desire’ which Forster champions in Where Angels Fear to Tread (1907). Together with Alec, Maurice steps outside of culture, nation and history. Finally rejecting that ‘speaking science’ which dismisses his desires as rubbish, yet accepting that which defines him as a congenital homosexual, Maurice finds himself within a radical interiority, alienated from the social world around him:
when he stopped outside the park, because the King and Queen were passing, he despised them at the moment he bared his head. It was as if the barrier that kept him from his fellows had taken another aspect. He was not afraid or ashamed any more. After all, the forests and the night were on his side, not theirs; they, not he, were inside a ring fence. (187)

The triumphant queer self is mutually exclusive with national and social belonging here. It is outside borders which are figured as national and as ‘civilised’. Here, in London, the narrative foreshadows Maurice and Alec’s final disappearance from culture, nation and narrative itself. Their escape from meaning is much like the disappearance of Forster’s earlier heroine, Evelyn, who literally, magically melts into the trees of her fenced-in forest in ‘The Other Kingdom’. The novel ends, not with Maurice and Alec joining or escaping, but with Clive. Maurice and Alec have escaped the novel itself. Maurice would rather ‘close such a book than leave it lying about to get dirtied . . . He could suffer no mixing of old and new . . . Having finished his confession, he must disappear from the world that brought him up’ (213). Maurice and Alec act in sympathy with Forster’s own much-quoted assertion (in a letter to his friend Florence Barger) that the novel was ‘unpublishable until my death and England’s’.14 His characters exit the space of realism, which sits at the conjunction of the everyday and historical time, and disappear into mythos. Forster poses the homosexual self as inconsistent with national history.

*The Well*, on the other hand, embraces historical time in a classic realist manner, unproblematically. The fact that generations of readers have taught each other to read Natalie Barney’s ‘real’ home through Valérie Seymour’s fictional one, and to make other such equivalencies, has mediated the novel’s truth claims. Such readings through the real, like the common practice of reading Bildungsromane from *David Copperfield* to *Zami* autobiographically, render the novel consistent with its historical context. Its bodies are real; we read the array of types in Seymour’s salon as coded references to real bodies which existed in time and place. Not just any time and place, but a specifically, productively queer time and place – Paris after the Great War.

The war itself provides *The Well*’s other use of history. Stephen, as an ambulance driver, finds scope for heroism in battle and there meets her most significant lover, Mary Llewellyn. This episode situates the positions of Mary and Stephen on a historical threshold. Women ambulance drivers function as signs of historical change as sexual progress:
They were part of a universal convulsion and were being accepted as such, on their merits. And although their Sam Browne belts remained swordless, their hats and their caps without regimental badges, a battalion was formed in those terrible years that would never again be completely disbanded. War and death had given them a right to life, and life tasted sweet, very sweet to their palates. Later on would come bitterness, disillusion, but never again would such women submit to being driven back to their holes and corners. (275)

Here, historical upheaval, the constant change which characterises the experience of modernity, is in specific dialogue with this new kind of individual, the invert with a meaningful social place.

Finally, both Maurice and The Well are embedded in another kind of historical time. In the narrative canon formation of queer literature in English, they are placed as very specific markers. Each is instrumentalised in a way that Woolf’s Orlando, to return to the earlier example, never has been. Whether and how The Well should be read, as a transgender or a lesbian novel, it held a central place in the reading histories of butch lesbians across several generations. Maurice is emblematic in another way, as the novel which spent six decades in the closet. Both The Well and Maurice partake of history through the middle twentieth century as emblems of subcultural identity. As productive, readerly narratives of queer desire they lend themselves to specific cultural use. This use depends on the structural elements of the Bildungsroman which they consciously deploy.

Work, Sex and Meaning: Patricia Highsmith and Valerie Taylor

At the close of The Way of the World, Moretti makes a claim for the ‘end of the century of the Bildungsroman’ in the end of nineteenth-century realism. Following a fairly standard elucidation of this crisis of narrative realism through the late work of George Eliot, he argues:

no convention outlives the fall of its foundations. And when the new psychology started to dismantle the unified image of the individual; when the social sciences turned to ‘synchrony’ and ‘classification’, thereby shattering the synthetic perception of history; when youth betrayed itself in its narcissistic desire to last forever; when in ideology after ideology the individual figured simply as a part of the whole – then the century of the Bildungsroman was truly at an end. (227–8)

Yet it was precisely these notions of ‘synchrony’ and ‘classification’, expressed as a continual dance of dissidence and inclusion, that enabled
the development of lesbian, gay and transgender Bildungsromane across the first half of the twentieth century. We might argue that the Bildungsroman did not end, but moved into subculture, including gay subculture, which fostered its specific qualities and enabled that incubation of queer subjects through which Western national cultures now claim global ethical dominance.

Throughout the twentieth century, the differences in narrative structure and style which distinguish The Well from Maurice – realist type versus universalised subject; bodily evidence versus diffuse consciousness; historical versus mythic time – would continue to be written across class difference as cultural registers of the popular and the literary. In 1952, with the burgeoning paperback market already proliferating a kaleidoscopic array of narratives of lesbian development, Patricia Highsmith published The Price of Salt (titled Carol in the UK) under the pseudonym Claire Morgan. Much like a character from George Gissing, Highsmith’s heroine, Therese, locates the modern self in an ambiguous class position which exists at an uneasy nexus of wage labour, aesthetic desire and sexual longing. These things trouble and overlap each other and in the tension among them Therese experiences her development. These forces are immediately evident in the novel’s opening scene, where the impermanent, threshold context of Therese’s life is established. She sits in the soul-destroying atmosphere of the cafeteria in the department store where she works for minimum wage, eating grey, unpleasant food and thinking of the paintings of Mondrian, of escaping birds and her vocation as a theatrical set designer. Throughout the first movement of the novel Therese is situated through images of entrapment. She is fascinated by a toy train, imprisoned on its tracks and forced to run by its ‘tyrannical master’: ‘It was like something gone mad in its imprisonment, something already dead that would never wear out, like the dainty, springy-footed foxes in the Central Park Zoo, whose complex footwork repeated and repeated as they circled their cages.’ At the department store Therese meets Mrs Robichek, who stands throughout the novel for its class sympathies, and functions as the abject self of its heroine. Ageing, unattractive and alone, an immigrant victim of a fickle labour market, Mrs Robichek fascinates and repels Therese. She later signals her attainment of maturity by overcoming her repulsion and sending odd presents of kitschy packaged food back to Mrs Robichek from across America.

The novel’s primary mise en scène established, Therese then experiences a dramatic and inexplicable cathexis towards a wealthy suburban mother. This scene is canonically placed in terms of the romance, in chapter three:
Their eyes met at the same instant, Therese glancing up from a box she was opening, and the woman turning her head so she looked directly at Therese. She was tall and fair, her long figure graceful in the loose fur coat that she held open with a hand on her waist. Her eyes were grey, colourless, yet dominant as light or fire, and, caught by them, Therese could not look away.

(35–6)

Therese’s body announces itself as her ‘heart stumbles’ and her ‘face grows hot’. All of the signals of the romance are there, including the structural placement of the scene. It is also embedded in a context of consumer desire, proletarian alienation and aesthetic longing, all firmly established in the first two chapters. This moment of lesbian desire strikes without warning and the novel never seeks to explain it. Its narrative of development, centred on Therese, is a coming to terms with a pre-existing condition, rather than a becoming in the face of social forces. In a manner now become common to most queer Bildungsromane, the self is a radically constant measure of the social world around it. The narrative of emergence presented here depends on the myth of an essential core for the individual, outside of social context.

*The Price of Salt* does carefully establish itself within the form of the Bildungsroman, even as it alters it. Immediately before we see Therese’s meeting with Carol, we find her reading Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (34). Therese’s hastily sketched back story shows her to be a kind of orphan, rejected by her mother. “Child, child,” the older Carol hails her at one point, “where do you wander – all by yourself?” (84). The novel’s climactic episode takes the form of a journey west, the very substrate of the American Bildungsroman in the twentieth century.

But there are no worries here about sexological categorisations, and psychoanalytic histories are only very lightly sketched. As Therese’s erstwhile boyfriend Richard tries to come to terms with her inexplicable distance, he asserts that lesbian desires “don’t just happen. There’s always some reason in the background.” When Therese dutifully searches her life history for such a background she cannot find one. She compares herself reflectively to stories she has heard about ‘girls falling in love, and she knew what kind of people they were and what they looked like. Neither she nor Carol had ever looked like that’ (100). This reflection is key to an understanding of how Highsmith places her heroine and her novel within the social world of the immediate post-war era, in opposition to its developing queer subcultures. Therese spends a good deal of time in Greenwich Village among ‘creatives’. She is aware of lesbian subculture, but rejects it.
Likewise, Highsmith herself, once the book was rejected by Random House, did not turn to the lively market for lesbian narrative existing in paperback houses nearby. She chose a respectable middlebrow publisher, Coward-McCann, and gained *The Price of Salt* a place on a list which included hardback reprints of classics and numerous volumes of what would today be called ‘accessible literary’ fiction. The novel earned a *New York Times* book review, in which Charles Rolo assured readers that Highsmith dealt with this ‘explosive material’ with ‘sensitivity and good taste’. The oppositions which structure both Therese’s understanding of her own lesbian desires and the review of the novel itself provide hints at the context of production and reception for lesbian, gay and transgender narrative in post-war America.

Many paperback houses imposed narrative formulas on queer novels during the 1950s, and it is possible, though not certain, that Therese and Carol would not have been allowed to end their novel together in a pulp paperback context. As the decade drew to a close, these formulas were superseded. Some editors, most notably Leona Nevler at Fawcett Gold Medal, allowed lesbian-identified authors to write open-ended or affirming novels for a growing subcultural audience. These novels, especially at Fawcett, took the form of series which followed a character or characters through various relationships, deliberately undoing the romance plot and its sense of an ending. These series clearly deployed a progress narrative of individual development within a hostile social context, and they shared with *The Price of Salt* that pointed opposition between lesbian fulfilment and capitalist alienation which characterises the post-war period.

The signal difference, for writers such as Ann Bannon and Valerie Taylor, who both published with Fawcett Gold Medal from the late 1950s into the 1960s, was the positing of the housewife as the nascent being of lesbian narrative. Her alienation derives from the context of heterosexual marriage, from not engaging in meaningful or productive labour. The structural formula here is a remarkable foreshadowing of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), with one radical difference. For Freidan ‘over-sexualisation’ is the problem of the housewife and the family; for Taylor and Bannon, sexualisation is the answer, the stabilising sense of an ending. We might say that these novels are written from the perspective of Carol, rather than Therese. Socially infantilised, these housewives function as threshold figures for realist narratives of queer development which illustrate those dominant structures of identity that imprison social actors in the bourgeois state. Like *The Price of Salt*, they follow the form of the
Bildungsroman in posing the emergent lesbian individual within and against the historical time frame of the nation.

Valerie Taylor’s *Stranger on Lesbos* (1959) opens as its heroine Frances returns to university, positioning her quite clearly at the centre of Bildung. Her son is a teenager and her husband is preoccupied with work. In the opening paragraph Frances has ‘a crazy feeling that the last twenty years had dissolved and she was fifteen again, hesitating on the threshold of County High’.17 In class she meets her first lesbian partner, and they embark on a relationship doomed to failure. This novel closes on Frances repenting and her husband granting forgiveness, heterosexual marriage restabilised in its sense of an ending. Four years later, in the same year in which *The Feminine Mystique* was first published (1963), Taylor brought out *Return to Lesbos* with Midwood-Tower. Here, Frances continues her movement towards stable identity, ending this volume in a fulfilling lesbian relationship. Again, as at the outset of *Stranger*, the close of *Return to Lesbos* gestures knowingly both towards the narrative of development in which her heroines are formed and to the serial repetition of desire and fulfilment which their context of publication allowed. On the final page, Frances’s new partner, Erika, leans ‘her whole weight against Frances, a promise for the night that lay ahead. “It’s a good beginning, though”, she says.’18 The series produced by Ann Bannon and Valerie Taylor in the late 1950s and 1960s clearly invoke the Bildungsroman’s sense of journey and emergence, as well as its production of identity as essential type. Yet they also resist the stabilising closure of the marriage plot as they evoke serial monogamy through both formal structure and content.

Taylor, Bannon and Highsmith all share a structure of feeling in which work, alienation and consumer/sexual desire form the context for the lesbian self. These novels, posing alienating labour against lesbian desire, seek to separate desire from its consumer context and put it back in the body. They dissent from a heterosexuality posed as a signal component of the structure of the bourgeois nation. As Frances lies awake next to her husband in *Return to Lesbos*, she reflects despairingly that ‘he even wanted to buy her a fur coat’. Her next thought is that ‘[t]o make love with a man seemed to her a kind of perversion’ (57). These women, depicted as possessing essentialist lesbian bodies, occupy a standpoint of critique *vis-à-vis* the relation between capital, sex and nation. In *The Price of Salt*, Richard attempts to convince Therese to abandon her road trip with Carol and participate in a more ‘healthy’ kind of journey. He first proffers Paris and aesthetic fulfilment, which Therese rejects in favour of meaningful creative work in New York. Once Therese has headed west, Richard
writes to her, ‘I’ll come out to you – and show you what America is really like’ (212). Somehow, the America she sees with Carol is not real. It is, like Forster’s mythic sylvan England, inside yet not inside the national space.

Highsmith and Taylor both position the desiring body through psychological prose. Frances reflects directly on bodily desire in internal monologue in Return to Lesbos: ‘The body, she reminded herself – Do this, do that, and the fulfilled body moves and purrs like a stroked kitten. But she was unable to minimize it. Even her skin felt good’ (105). The lesbian body is essential and exhaustive here, and Taylor’s concern is to examine its consequences in a social world which is not structured to accommodate it. The same might be said of The Price of Salt, though its narrative strategies arguably exist in a difference cultural register. Therese and Carol do have sex, in a hotel room scene where it is rendered almost accidental. As Rolo’s review puts it, in wonderfully deflected language, ‘it is Therese who, with purblind innocence, causes them to become lovers’.19 Highsmith renders sex as Forster does, as metaphorical, amorphous and transcendent, inside Therese’s radical interiority: ‘And now it was a pale blue distance and space, an expanding space in which she took flight suddenly like a long arrow. The arrow seemed to cross an impossibly wide distance with ease, seemed to arc on and on in space, and not quite to stop. Then she realised she still clung to Carol’ (200). Presumably, this diffusion of the desiring body into abstract language constitutes what the reviewer calls ‘sensitivity and good taste’. It also seems likely that it played a role in the novel’s placement with a middlebrow publisher rather than a pulp paperback house.

There are two models for the lesbian body here, one produced through more direct language than the other, and this narrative difference defines, at least in part, the cultural register of the two novels. In terms of reception, it is always impossible to know who read what and how, specifically what work readers did in the interpretation of these novels. Kate Adams contrasts The Price of Salt and a 1952 paperback called Women’s Barracks. She argues that Highsmith’s message is ‘radical’ specifically because it is couched in conventional terms. Women’s Barracks on the other hand, held up as the exemplum of lesbian pulp, does ‘the dominant culture’s work by representing lesbian sexuality and the independent woman as threats to bourgeois culture and to its ideals of normal womanhood’.20 There is an implication regarding reception and cultural use here. To ‘do the dominant culture’s work’ would be to stabilise this ideology in the minds of actual women and men. To be radical would be to destabilise, to make ideology visible to the reader. Yet this is not theorised, in Adams or in
the work of other critics who damned pulp narrative, such as Bonnie Zimmerman and Julie Abraham. Abraham objects specifically to the romance plot, which she terms the ‘heterosexual plot’, reading lesbian love stories as ‘mere’ substitutions. Bonnie Zimmerman contrasts them to ‘more serious’ literature. The difference between Highsmith’s work and Taylor’s, and between the critical reception of each, is a repetition of more widely applied critical ideas of the damning popular and the ideological passivity of the mass of readers, who are, as usual, feminised.21 Once again, these readings ignore the centrality of romance narrative to the development of the desiring self posed against the social world, the common origin of romance and Bildungsroman. They also fail to note that romance narrative, from its inception, has been a clear subversion of narratives which seek to instrumentalise sexuality in the realm of the rational, to place it in a subordinate relation to capital.

Yet even within these formulations which valorise The Price of Salt over contemporary pulp, Highsmith’s narrative is posed falsely as structurally opposed to those of writers such as Taylor. Both deploy structures of Bildung, placing their heroines radically on the threshold of becoming in the face of a hostile social world. Both pose lesbian desire as disruptive to relations of work, capital and nation in the bourgeois state. Each novel, though its narrative strategy may be distinct, seeks to pose a desiring lesbian body as the foundation of its heroine’s experience. Finally, Highsmith’s narrative strategies do not place her outside of cultural authority, are not in that sense disruptive, but rather form her (limited) claim to it, in the form of literariness.

Critical arguments around the production and reception of lesbian and gay pulp narratives tend to position what is most often called ‘dominant’ or ‘heterosexual’ culture against a queer culture which would, ideally, disrupt, challenge or change it. This cultural model initially left the ability to do this, cultural agency, to the producers of such texts, rather than their readers. Two or three decades after the war, in the context of popular movements for sexual liberation, the question of queer author against publisher as representative of dominant culture, of art/truth versus capital, would be answered differently.

**Subculture and Small Presses**

From the 1960s, identitarian liberation movements were subject to increasing definition and differentiation. Individuals existing at the nexus of various relations of class, race and sexuality expressed the impetus to choose
between competing self-definitions and calls to political participation. This
model of dissident groups defined by identity, as Alan Sinfield points out,
creates space for recognition and community solidarity at the same time as
it relies on a structure which positions such groups always as outsiders
within the national space. Sinfield examines such texts as Larry Kramer’s
1985 play *The Normal Heart* and David Wojnarowicz’s collection of auto-
biographical essays, *Close to the Knives* (1991), noting how each poses the
gay male subject as an outsider petitioning for citizenship rights within his
own nation. This outsider/insider formulation of the national space is the
flip side of subcultural empowerment, Sinfield argues. Through this inevi-
table positioning we are always reincorporated into that ideological struc-
ture which posed us as outsiders in the first instance. At the same time, for
Sinfield, subcultures do ‘constitute partially alternate subjectivities’ where
we can think ourselves, and live ourselves, at least halfway out of
ideology.\(^{22}\)

In the 1980s and 1990s, on both sides of the Atlantic, small presses
constituted specifically around feminist and queer communities prolifer-
ated. Many of the novels now recognised as classics of the coming out genre
were originally published by such presses, which seemed at least partly to
sidestep the questions of high and low culture, open expression of identity
and damning ideology raised by the marketing and critical reception of
Highsmith and Taylor in earlier decades. These novels pose a radically
queer self against the social world, and yet also posit a new relation between
queer self and national culture, one defined by the subcultural movements
in which they were embedded. In the context of subcultural articulation,
the queer Bildungsroman expresses a new formal reflexivity and a multipli-
city of redeployments, challenging the relation between the
individual and historical time and yet retaining its basic assumptions.
The Bildungsroman as a novelistic form is clearly central to what Sinfield
calls, ‘the typically subcultural process of reinvesting an earlier textual
moment’ (285). It is the inevitable tool for the coming out novel fostered
in this mid-twentieth-century small-press context, posing the queer subject
which Sinfield argues is ‘poised at the brink of perpetual emergence’ (281).
As such, the Bildungsroman is the inevitable form for queer subcultural
articulation. This is not accidental, but reflects those relations between
sexuality, desire, progress, individual life narrative and the rise of the
bourgeois nation state discussed at the start of this chapter.

Three novels might serve to illustrate some reworkings of the
Bildungsroman by lesbian and gay writers publishing with independent
presses on either side of the Atlantic: Jeanette Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not
the Only Fruit (1985), Neil Bartlett’s Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall (1990) and Audre Lorde’s Zami: A New Spelling of My Name (1982) were all published by independent presses and all knowingly rework the classic structure of the Bildungsroman. Winterson’s Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, originally published by the newly formed Pandora Press in 1985, details the emergence of a lesbian teenager in a small northern English town. In her introduction to the 1991 Vintage edition, Winterson is at pains to situate the novel on the progressive side of the imagined postmodern break which then dominated the critical landscape. She claims that, ‘In structure and style Oranges wasn’t like any other novel.’ Specifically rejecting narratives of progress and development, she writes disingenuously: ‘Oranges is an experimental novel: its interests are anti-linear.’23 The claim for unprecedented form erases the novel’s own modernist history. At a stroke, it discounts Nella Larsen, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes and other sexually dissident writers who worked against realist unity of purpose and meaning. It also denies the novel’s own structure, which clearly leads the reader from the oppression to the expression of an essentially lesbian self.

Winterson’s (and her critics’) claims for Oranges as non-linear and unprecedented are based on its magically real elements and its inserted fragments of fairy-tale narrative, which provide didactic parallels to the novel’s realist action. These elements sometimes function as detours around expressions of desire and emotion, as in the scene where Jeanette first has sex with Katy. In place of the action here, in place of the expression of lesbian desire or the presence of the desiring lesbian body, we are given a quasi-biblical passage that evokes the Song of Solomon. Yet the Old Testament book itself produces more textual body than Oranges. In the aggregate these passages allow the novel to maintain its ironic distance, which breaks only once, in the romanticised depiction of Jeanette’s intimacy with Melanie. Immediately, the narrator asks, ‘What is it about intimacy that makes it so very disturbing?’ (101). We might see these narrative deflections as Winterson’s refusal to place the lesbian self in a determining body, or to romanticise lesbian desire. The novel also refuses historical context and national narrative. Its action could be almost anywhere in the twentieth-century West, and in place of historical time we get the shift back and forth from small-town community to the static time of myth.

Still, Oranges provides a very clear narration of individual development, upon which it does reflect. The novel’s final movement, named after the Book of Ruth, shows Jeanette having moved, like Tom Jones or David
Copperfield, from country to city and a stable identity. Her reflective return home closes the novel. The narrator remarks on the threshold state, on moving forward and looking back, and in invoking Lot’s wife, also invokes Highsmith’s earlier lesbian Bildungsroman. ‘Going back after a long time will make you mad, because the people you left behind do not like to think of you changed’ (156). The structure of Oranges is clearly linear, and designed to produce the emergent queer self. Much as Winterson tries to sidestep the relation between narrative and identity, they cannot be written as separate effects.

In Ready to Catch Him Should He Fall, published by Serpent’s Tail in 1990, Neil Bartlett playfully embraces the narrative of progress, providing its end point and its production of meaning in the safety of subcultural space. The novel’s characters are rendered allegorical by names such as Boy, O and Madame and its narrator engages in a direct address which invites its readers into the sense of belonging and community Bartlett celebrates: ‘if you don’t know what that feeling is, if you don’t know why it’s like that then you know nothing, nothing, nothing. I’m sorry.’ Playing with the productive narrative form of the romance plot, the novel is divided into sections titled ‘Single’, ‘Couple’ and ‘Family’. Gesturing at its historical relation to molly house culture, the ‘Couple’ section is divided into such chapters as ‘Publishing the Banns’, ‘Robing the Bride’ and ‘Setting up Home’. Throughout the novel’s first sequence its central character, Boy, walks obsessively around London, travelling countless miles without purpose, the subject of diffuse desire without context. In a deliberate use of the form developed as Bildungsroman, Bartlett places Boy as the young traveller on the threshold of emergence and identity.

Stumbling on ‘the bar’ gives Boy context and meaning, and the novel details his mentoring by Madame, his acquisition of queer history through directed reading of her library, and his social positioning at the centre of a dramatic romance in which the entire community voyeuristically participates. Primarily a dramatic writer, Bartlett creates a highly visual sense of enclosed, radically separate and almost timeless community in Ready to Catch Him, but it is a community stalked by history. At the edges of the narrative, sometimes graphically separated into chapters of only a paragraph or two, we see the violence done to gay men in the streets outside the bar. Minor characters arrive bruised or cut, or disappear into hospitals outside the story. These episodes take the form of Gothic haunt- ings, only just there, liminal and threatening but never fully incorporated. In this way, Bartlett creates the sense of subcultural enclosure within the broader and more hostile culture outside the bar and outside the narrative.
Gothic and other generic effects in Bartlett’s novel allow the embedding of the queer self in both textual and national history while at the same time maintaining his radical separateness, his manifest dissent.

Audre Lorde’s American novel *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, originally published by Persephone Press in 1982, places its protagonist at the centre of national history, used as the backdrop for the production of meaningful selfhood. Like *Ready to Catch Him*, *Zami* reflects both thematically and structurally on the effects of subculture. Towards the novel’s close the narrator reflects on urban lesbian subculture in the years prior to popular gay liberation:

> Keeping ourselves together and on our own tracks, however wobbly, was like trying to play the Dinizulu War Chant or a Beethoven sonata on a tin dog whistle.
>
> The important message seemed to be that you had to have a place. Whether or not it did justice to whatever you felt you were about, there had to be some place to refuel and check your flaps.
>
> In times of need and great instability, the place sometimes became more a definition than the substance of why you needed it to begin with.\(^{25}\)

This more critical formulation of subculture typifies Lorde’s generally reflexive treatment of the relationship between the individual self and collective meaning. Ultimately, the narrator comes to realise that ‘there was a piece of the real me bound in each place, and growing’. She is multiple and contingent, but multiply rooted. Subculture, with its many partial inclusions and contingencies, provides meaning in its very structure, rather than its content: ‘It was a while before we came to realise that our place was the very house of difference rather than the security of any one particular difference’ (226).

Throughout the novel, Lorde references the major historical events of the middle twentieth century – war, colonial nation-building and revolt, political execution and the emergence of identitarian resistance movements. At the same time, she often poses the narrative of its central character, Audre, as markedly oblique to these events. In a second subtitle the novel hails itself as the template for a new form, ‘biomythography’. Like Winterson and Bartlett, Lorde recognises a crucial relation between narrative form and the production of identity. Where *David Copperfield* and *Jane Eyre* announced themselves as ‘autobiographies’ knowing that truth claim would be read as fiction, *Zami* announces her life story as myth knowing it will be read as the truth of experience and both embracing and subverting that reading. Biomythography purposefully sidesteps the opposition of objective and subjective truths. This, by extension, also disrupts
the opposition between high modernism and realism and allows for a critical narrative which can usefully trace the history of the queer Bildungsroman across the twentieth century.

We might perhaps read *Zami* in the context of a queer Bildungsroman such as Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story* (1982), which places its emergent queer white subject at the threshold of the racially organised map of the nation, as drawn in the American canon. Like Bartlett and Lorde, White plays pointedly with the structure of Bildungsroman, gesturing early on to English public school narratives, refusing linear plot development and concluding with a paradoxical sense of arrival and contingency. Yet this emergent subject produces a remarkably stable sense of national history. Like Carson McCullers, White uses the racial geography of the American city to produce sexuality as mystery and sexual emergence as a journey into the unknown. Having related his first sexual experience and his first exposure to the black neighbourhoods where his family’s servants live, the narrator then waits to pick up a trick in a square full of ‘hillbillies’. ‘In my naïveté’, he tells us, ‘I imagined that all poor people, black and white, like each other and that here... I might find my way back to the [black] street, that smell of burning honey, that blood as red as mine and that steady, colorless flare in the glass chimney...’

Here and elsewhere in the novel, the mysterious black neighbourhood is directly conflated with the narrator’s mysterious desires. White’s queer narrator has internalised the racial geography of America. It is his psychic landscape, and thus the substance of a radically white queer subject. Like those subjects of the European Bildungsroman whom White invokes at the outset, he need not destabilise national narrative in order to stabilise himself. He is consistent with the canonical structure of modernity.

Lorde’s *Zami* poses its narrator as oblique to history, allowing Lorde to present a historical margin from which the meaning of the national narrative changes. Initially, this off-centre history is formulated by the manner in which Audre’s mother filters the reality of racism for her children. Her mother elaborately pretends that white people spit randomly in the street, not directly and purposefully on black children. Immediately, we as readers are invited to read through the official narrative, against the grain. Travelling from New York to the segregated south with her family, young Audre is told that the food served in train cars is unhealthy, not that it is forbidden. The charade falls apart when they are refused service at a lunch counter in Washington DC. Further on in the narrative and years later in Audre’s life, the protest against the execution of the Rosenbergs is presented in the context of this memory of lunch counter segregation.
History, for Audre, is a determined and continuous narrative within which the lesbian self emerges, but this history does not run parallel to national hegemony. Roughly midway through the narrative Audre hears the name of Crispus Attucks for the first time. ‘How was that possible? . . . I had been taught by some of the most highly respected historians in the country. Yet, I never once hear the name mentioned of the first man to fall in the American Revolution’ (132–3).

Often, those moments in the novel which structure Audre as an emergent individual are also written metaphorically through grand historical narrative. Describing her early teen years, the narrator tells us that, ‘Relationships in my family came to resemble nothing so much as a West Indian version of the Second World War. Every conversation with my parents, particularly with my mother, was like a playback of the Battle of the Bulge in Black panorama with stereophonic sound. Blitzkrieg became my favourite symbol for home’ (82–3). While queering national history by posing it through the specific individual standpoint of black experience, Lorde also subsumes its grand landscape into her own psychological one, transforming it in the process.

Like Forster, Lorde refuses the separation of psychic and physical selves. Throughout Zami, the desiring body is rendered palpable and seamlessly embedded in the development of consciousness. Early on, the narrator describes the onset of menstruation through a scene in which the pounding of her mother’s souse for her favourite dinner becomes a profoundly sensual experience. Across nine pages of text, this simple preparation of food becomes not just the sign of cultural inheritance, but of desire for her mother’s body, sexual awakening and physical change (71–80).

Zami also presents us with the consequences of the sexual body in a lengthy and graphic episode which poses illegal abortion as both a historically bounded social experience and a highly focalised experience of the textual body (107–15). This abortion is part of Audre’s total lesbian experience, of living in a sexual body in a particular time and place. It situates her female body within the surrounding narrative of butch-femme subculture. Her early sexual experiences are both social, in their negotiation of the subcultural imperative to butch-femme role play, and essential: ‘I never questioned where my knowledge of her body and her need came from. Loving Ginger that night was like coming home to a joy I was meant for, and I only wondered, silently, how I had not known it would be so’ (139). This and other sexual encounters in the novel, including abortion, described in frank and sometimes rapturous detail, are presented specifically as stages on a journey to meaning and stable self-positioning.
Sex is the stuff of knowledge, and Audre must consume it to attain self-realisation: ‘Until the very moment that our naked bodies touched . . . I had no idea what I was doing there, nor what I wanted to do there’ (138). The trajectory of Bildung here is towards a specific relation between the individual and history, one which reveals national history as contingent and constructed. At the same time, it is towards an essential lesbian identity grounded in the sexual/textual body of the poet Audre Lorde, conflated imperfectly with the author of the book. Lorde’s use/subversion of the formal effects of Bildungsroman ‘reinvests an earlier textual moment’ in just the way Sinfield describes. It is possible because the movement of resistance and incorporation is the stuff of the Bildungsroman structure. Positioning its subjects as emerging into meaning against the national historical, Bildungsroman performs, at the level of meaning, a similar effect of resistance and incorporation to that which Sinfield describes as the substance of subculture.

Vanishing Points

The turn of the twenty-first century has been characterised in part by a new and more centrally defining relationship between queer self and national identity in the West. Both Jasbir Puar and Rahul Rao have noted the new ideological positioning of the post-9/11 West as the site of queer freedom, opposed to Islamic nation states. Puar argues in Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times that ‘there is a transition underway in how queer subjects are relating to nation states’ (xii). Lesbian, gay male and transgender identities now function simultaneously as signs of the progressive freedom of the West and as perversions which queer demonised members of Islamic states. We might think of Khaled Hosseini’s The Kite Runner (2003) as an example of this formulation. Its evil characters are Taliban leaders with hidden paedophilic, gay desires and its protagonist ends this novel of development safely within a heterosexual American family, flying a kite in the arguably iconic queer space of Golden Gate Park. Focusing on the popular discourse of metrosexual identity, Puar argues that, ‘As a counterpart to the age of U.S. imperialism, metrosexuality triumphantly hails American modernity as the space of sexual exceptionalism and promotes a union between queerness and patriotism’ (69).

Similar ideological oppositions between East and West, figured as sexual persecution and incorporation, arguably operate throughout Europe. We might say that the subject of queer Bildung now emerges on the global, rather than the national, stage. Queer identity now functions as a national
border, rather than a marginal space within the nation. With queer subjects so intrinsic to national identity, can they still act as those semi-outsiders which Alan Sinfield describes? Can a central, radically queer and emergent figure pose the kind of cultural resistance and incorporation which has come to define queer Bildungsromane? Or can we follow Moretti’s model and claim an end of the century of queer Bildungsroman?

Gay and transgender Bildungsromane are certainly alive and well, especially in the young adult fiction market, which is so hungry for structurally unified narratives of development. Indeed, queer protagonists seem privileged subjects for young adult fiction in English in the second decade of the twenty-first century, where, produced by both queer- and straight-identified authors, they stand in for the alienation/incorporation dynamic more generally. Again, this is a further expression of the centrality of the queer self to current Western notions of ethical correctness. The new, closer relation between queer subjects and national identities means that subjects of queer Bildungsromane function much as the emergent young artist or entrepreneur did for the nineteenth-century Bildungsroman. They have been incorporated as new signifiers of the triumph of belonging over adversity which is the mythic relation between individual and nation state.

There are vanishing points for queer Bildungsromane, but it is likely they have been with us all along. Two such vanishing points, historical and linguistic, are exemplified by J. T. LeRoy’s Sarah (2000) and Adam Mars-Jones’s ‘John Cromer’ trilogy, which begins with Pilcrow (2008) and continues with Cedilla (2011). These narratives pose queer selves as threshold figures, as journeying forward, yet as inessential, contingent, outside of national space and history or constituted in linguistic instability. Once we call them Bildungsroman, have we stretched the definition beyond a useful meaning?

LeRoy’s Sarah, which focuses on Cherry Vanilla, a twelve-year-old transgendered sex worker, opens by posing its central character on the edge of the attainment of meaningful work and identity. She will be gifted with the raccoon penis bone which stamps her as belonging to the pimp Glad, and to those in the know, as a special brand of sexual experience. We follow Cherry on an ill-conceived journey full of hazards as she makes a kind of sense of her world, but the novel quickly comes apart in terms of both genre and stable meaning. We find ourselves in a magically real world in which plastic icons hold magic power, truck stops serve elaborate gourmet meals and twelve-year-old sex workers have second sight.
The primary drive of the novel is Cherry’s desire both to be and to have her mother. She derives sexual pleasure in being called by her mother’s name, Sarah. She attempts to bath like Sarah, to dress like her, to make up like her and to do the same work. These desires are the one element of the novel presented as stable, as natural. At the culmination of her adventures, having achieved something like a stable sense of identity through her work, Cherry returns to her original ‘lot’, to the room in which she began the novel, living with Sarah: ‘Every fiber in my body yearns for her, to tell her I am home. It feels like we are two magnets, separated by a loose-leaf sheet.’

Breaking into the room, pushing aside the inevitable, physically threatening male customer, Cherry climbs into the bed and experiences a blissful union with her mother’s body. The following sentence finds her in jail, and we realise that the man and woman in the hotel room were strangers, that Sarah has been gone for months, and that all of the novel’s repeated experiences of bodily, biological identity and desire have been falsely constructed. There is no sense of an ending for Cherry, no clicking into place. Its final assertions are undone as they are made.

Place, too, historical and national space, are rejected here, together with the conventions of realism. Though Sarah produces a more fluid and lyrical narrative than Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit, it performs a similar rejection of nation and history. The truck-stop worlds of Sarah are never permeated by any larger historical time or space. Occasional references outside of them, to Yankees or Paris, only enhance their radical separateness. The space is clearly southern and the novel partakes of all the ‘queer’ effects of the represented American South, but only as a national margin. Sarah speaks from the abject of national history, deliberately playing on associations of southern perversity, superstition and historical dissent. As such, its queer protagonist has no national history against which to appear, no hegemonic culture within which to emerge. By Sinfield’s definition we might not even call it subcultural, since it provides no call for inclusion at all. We ought not to pose this as a ‘postmodern’ refusal of identity and stable meaning, however. This is not a break with modernity. All of the same claims might be made for Djuna Barnes’s Robin, who sits uncomfortably at the centre of Nightwood (1936), and ends that canonically modernist novel in a specific retreat from identity and coherent meaning. Sarah’s primary meta-fictional effect was the scandal created around the revelation that its author was in fact a heterosexual woman named Laura Albert. In that moment our attachment to authenticity, to reading through character identity to real bodies, was starkly revealed.
In *Pilcrow* and *Cedilla*, Adam Mars-Jones makes a determined claim to postmodern narrative, reworking Proust to the point of absurdity. His protagonist is confined to bed, prey to hypersensitivity and morbid linguistic obsession, conveying all of the neuroses and none of the nostalgic affect of Proust’s narrator. Mars-Jones produces a queer protagonist who, unable to use his body, retreats into language as pure abstraction. The body of John Cromer, protagonist of Mars-Jones’s continuing trilogy, is rigid and unresponsive, disabled by improper treatment of his illness. John’s body is the tight boundary of his experience, and as such is insistently present. In a manner common to narratives of immobilising disability, however, it is presented as radically separate from the self as mind. This mind is posed continually as the developing self of the protagonist. Its substrate is language.

At the outset the novel signifies its address to Bildungsroman by pointedly invoking both *Tristram Shandy* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as intertexts. It quickly settles on a Proustian formation, however, and this becomes its sustained mode. Confined for years to bed, and of course, precociously intelligent, John becomes minutely and pedantically obsessed with language. The narrator is at pains to point to the contingency of linguistic meaning and the ultimate arbitrariness of signifiers. In the section entitled ‘The Twenty-Seventh Letter’ John has a lengthy argument about the alphabet with his visiting tutor, who insists the alphabet has only 26 letters. John draws the ‘æ’, establishing both the contingency of systems of meaning and his own precocity at a stroke. Such meditations on signs continue throughout both *Pilcrow* and *Cedilla*. Eventually, the character begins to muse on the self, ‘this mysterious sense of “I” . . . this entity which burned’.\(^{30}\) Having established already the novel’s linguistic distance from any such stable formulations, it now invites us to read this with heavy irony. The novel is divided into very short sections, each titled for a word play derived from its content, and such continued breaks and prolepses interrupt any attempt to form a continuity of meaning.

We are presented with John’s same-sex object-choice, at first characteristically deflected from the sight of two men affectionately touching onto a linguistic meditation on the word ‘mate’, which the upper-class John has never before heard. This is quickly dismissed as a mechanical concern. The thoughts John had were not to do ‘with touch and excitement, they were to do with understanding how the world worked. In a sense, they were scientific’ (163). By how the world works, the confined John means, how language lies on top of reality and causes it to be interpreted. These self-consciously postmodernist gestures create, as advertised, a very
particular, contingent relationship to the real. They pose a self inside language, rather than inside the social world. Yet selves inside the social-historical world, like selves inside language, are constructed by context. In refusing stability, such gestures also sidestep the dynamism of self against social circumstance which is another kind of contingency, in historical meaning.

Can the ‘John Cromer’ trilogy be called a Bildungsroman, then? Can Sarah, refusing the national historical space, produce the meaning of social individuals? E. M. Forster invoked the nation specifically in rejecting it. He constructed the nation as bounded, restrictive and radically opposed to an essential queer self. For LeRoy and Mars-Jones, the nation is not rejected, it is largely absent. It and history have little part in making the meaning of the individuals at the centre of these narratives. This despite the fact that Pilcrow and Cedilla are set very carefully within historical time. Mars-Jones’s chosen treatment of language leaves his protagonist so tightly inside the subjective turn that the dynamic relationship to history, that relationship that is Bildung, cannot take effect.

We might follow Moretti in concluding that ‘the coming out novel’ says more about modernity than it does about sexually dissident individuals. Its positioning of the individual against the national historical, its blending of subjective and historical time and emergence, is inescapably realist. The centrality of sexual subjects to this narrative is not marginal; it is structural. It expresses the centrality of sexual subjects to modernity per se. New, twenty-first century positionings of queer Bildungsromane continue to pose the modern subject as the location of individual will and desire, emerging within history. The Bildungsroman is, and has been, an instrumental form. Its enactment of narrative time is teleological, with an end point in stable identity. It does the work of situating subjects inside history and material life and has no structural resistance to cultural incorporation. Given the nature of its relationship to the historical real, Bildungsromane will necessarily evolve as relations of nation, capital and sexuality shift. We might argue that the later twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first is, in fact, the Bildungsroman’s queer moment. But is that moment as transformative as we once hoped it would be?