In the early summer of 1981 a young gay man by the name of Neil Bartlett moved from a small town to the big city. In his case, the big city happened to be London, and it was not altogether unfamiliar territory to him. “When I was sixteen I used to come up here on the train to go to the museums, to stand and look at the pictures, and also to be looked at, picked up, and then when I was twenty, I would come up here to meet someone. It was always the place to be. I used to get an erection just waiting for the train.”

Exciting and terrifying as it was for Bartlett to embark at last on a new life in the big city, getting there was only the beginning. After all, it is one thing to visit a gay metropolis like London, and quite another thing to move there. “Coming to London... isn’t something you do just by stepping off the train; it takes years, believe me, it’s taken me years” (xx). That is because entering the metropolitan gay scene means—or, rather, it used to mean, at the time when that scene was still flourishing, when (before the age of the internet) there was no real alternative to it—it meant entering gay life, encountering the full width and breadth of gay culture, expanding one’s sexual literacy, discovering and making gay history, ceasing to be merely homosexual and learning how to be gay.
In order to find your way in the city, you need to lose yourself in it. The book in which Bartlett recorded his forays into gay culture begins with an epigraph from Walter Benjamin’s *A Berlin Chronicle* (1932): “Not to find one’s way in a city may well be uninteresting and banal. It requires ignorance — nothing more. But to lose oneself in a city...” Losing oneself is not a mere figure of speech for Bartlett: it describes an entire project. Coming to London, learning how to be gay, entails losing yourself, the self you used to have, and becoming who you are. Which is one reason why it takes years.

Losing yourself is the best method of finding your way. Gradually you discover new patterns of existence amid the changed conditions of metropolitan queer life. Some of those patterns, Bartlett found, had already been laid down for him. He started to realize that the gay life he was learning to lead in London was in fact continuous with the life that had been led there by other gay men, going back a century or more. Not completely continuous, of course, but continuous to an astonishing degree.

Coming to London meant moving into a life that already existed — I started to talk to other people for the first time, to go to places that already had a style, a history if you like. What I’ve done, I suppose, is to connect my life to other lives, even buildings and streets that had an existence prior to mine. This is in itself remarkable, because for the longest time imaginable I experienced my gayness in complete isola-
Learning how to be gay, becoming who you are, is not about realizing your authentic individual identity but about acceding to a new, relational identity by recognizing how you resemble and differ from other gay men.

It was by discovering the extent of his commonality with other gay men and by acknowledging a connection with them that Bartlett ultimately was able to come into his own gayness. As the critic Dianne Chisholm astutely puts it, Bartlett “senses, uncannily, that this connection has been prepared for him in advance, not by his contemporaries but by the first generation of ‘gay’ men to come out in the era of Oscar Wilde. Thus the man who comes out and into his own in the city of the 1980s is not original. He becomes who he is by making himself over in the character of a species of urban dweller that came into existence in the late 1800s. He owes his existential becoming to a historic production.”

“It’s quite true,” Bartlett admits, relishing the apparent paradox (and echoing the French poet Arthur Rimbaud), “I am other people.”

He explains, “When people ask me why I live in London, I say, I’ve made a life for myself. But I haven’t invented a life; I have moved into, made a place for myself in a life that already existed” (205).
I didn’t so much “come out” as “go in,” since at the very moment at which we come out, declare our difference from the world, we immerse ourselves in a highly stylized, pressured, conventional society; gay society. Although the society I am part of is no more mixed than is any other part of British life (we may sleep together, but that does not mean that we share a life), I still feel, obscurely, that we are all the same, that we have a common identity, common interests. I have found that it is when we are most like each other, when we enter an economy based on the exchange of shared signs, that we have found our greatest strength (206-207).

Bartlett was not upset or threatened by the possibility that the modern individual, especially the modern gay male individual, might be generic. He found a source of affirmation in the imagined experience of commonality with gay men as a group. “Originality,” after all, “is not a virtue in our culture; the most beautiful and successful men model themselves on other men” (201).

We may be constantly inventing and reinventing ourselves, making our lives up as we go along (as Bartlett believed [30, 171]), but we never start from scratch. On the contrary, “we... are profoundly unoriginal,” he declares, with a certain satisfaction. “It’s not only in pornography that all men are the same. We grow up invisible and alone, but then we characteristically move from complete isolation into what feels like a complete culture in a very short space of time.” What we sacrifice in individual uniqueness we make up for in an escape from solitude. “Being predictable is a small price to pay for sharing something, being able to talk” (204-205).
Far from needing “to reject any stereotypes, roles or fictions,” Bartlett tried to find meaning in them (206). He experimented with the possibility of recognizing himself in contemporary forms of gay life—even in gay clichés. “I matched my life with the patterns of other men around me. I taught myself the pleasure of being like other people. I went to the same places, I had the same sort of sex life, I talked about roughly the same things and in roughly the same language. I didn’t either need or want to know anybody’s name. More recently I’ve started experimenting with the other extreme, matching the patterns of my life with those of just one other man. It feels like another variation on the same strategy, just as necessary and just as pleasurable. All the time, I think, we want to find out about each other, to know if we really belong to each other, belong together” (xx). Is there, in the end, such a thing as gay identity, gay society, gay culture, gay subjectivity? Is there a collective gay subject who can say “we”? Are we really all the same? How far does that gay commonality extend from one person to the next, from one moment in time to the next?

For all his talk of sameness and commonality, Bartlett was no naive or happy-go-lucky essentialist. He knew that gay men are not all the same, that we do not necessarily share a life. He was in fact uneasy speaking about gay men as a group, about using the first person plural. “When I say ‘we’ for instance, I mean we gay men. I flinch and want to explain. This word would make perfect sense in a bar, but here I am using it in a book, and I have no way of knowing if the reader is gay, or a man, or has any investment in or commitment to understanding this language... Nonetheless, I think that we do have to speak to one another, in our own language” (xxii). And, in a note, Bartlett adds, somewhat defensively,
This book was written by a gay man, born in 1958, living in London from 1982-1987. I hope it is clear that it is not about any other time or place, and is in no sense a “representative” gay text, a text about “being gay.” The geography and obsessions of this particular male are peculiar, not typical. The word *gay*, throughout the book, is not meant to be equivalent in meaning to *homosexual*, any more than it is meant to be equivalent to *Uranian* or *invert* or any of the other words used (241).
Identities

kultura. Toa bil eksperiment na srodnost, obid da se konstruira nov identitet definiiran so upatuvaњe na pripadnosta kon edna grupa - obid za заjarmuвањe na целата сила на идентификувањето. Затоа, да се биде геј било да се заземе позиција на колективен субјект кој требало да ги претставува непознатите геј мажи, тие кои не сме ги сретнале, геј мажите кои починале пред да се родиме. Тоа што Бартлет успева да ни го каже за своето необично искусување на бивањето геј во одредено време и простор излегува дека, можеби единствено токму поради таа причина, има значително пошироки одеци. Затоа што во неговата суштина е страстното убедување за сродност со геј мажи како група.

* * *

Da беше Нил Бартлет Американец, без чувство за историја, ќе напишеше приказна за излегување - приказна за една индивидуа, не за една култура. Тој не би пишувал за процесот на губење на себе си, туку за процесот на наоѓање на себе си (206). Тој би ја раскажал приказната за откривање на својата вистинска сеbnost – и попатното постигнување на самоприфакање, гордост и љубов. Во тој случај неговата книга, колку и да е потресна или информативна, би им се приключила на мноштвото слични приказни кои геј лицата ги пишуваат со децении, и тоа не само во Соединетите Американски Држави. Но, работитите стоеле така што Бартлет не бил заинтересиран за раскажување на чисто лична приказна. Всушност, тој не мисел дека има чисто лична приказна за раскажување. „Можеби мојот живот во градот не е до таа мерка индивидуален и природен колку што е колективен и одреден“, забележа тој (206). Затоа тој посака да не зборува со индивидуален глас туку со онолку различни геј мушки гласови колку што можел да собере. И навистина дал сè од себе за во

force of identification. To be gay was therefore to take up a collective subject position that was supposed to represent gay men one did not know, had never met, gay men who had died before one was born. What Bartlett manages to tell us about his peculiar experience of being gay in a particular time and place turns out, if only for that very reason, to have considerably wider resonances. For central to it is the passionate conviction of being related to gay men as a group.

* * *

If Neil Bartlett had been an American, without a sense of history, he would have written a coming-out story—a story about an individual, not a culture. He would have written not about the process of losing himself but about the process of finding himself (206). He would have told the story of discovering his true self—and achieving self-acceptance, pride, and love along the way. In which case his book, however moving or informative, would simply have joined the crowd of similar stories that gay people have been writing for decades, and not only in the United States. But, as it happened, Bartlett was not interested in telling a purely personal story. In fact, he did not think he had a purely personal story to tell. “Perhaps my life in this city is not so much individual and natural as collective and determined,” he remarked (206). He therefore wished to speak not in an individual voice but in as many different gay male voices as he could muster. And he did his best to hear in those voices—to learn to recognize in them—echoes of his own.
It was not always easy for Bartlett to locate and to identify the gay men whose earlier lives had “determined” his “life in this city.” If, in the end, he was able to forge a connection between his individual subjectivity and that of “other, dead Londoners,” it was only by dint of considerable ingenuity and persistent effort.

I suppose I realize how ignorant I am. If we don’t learn anything from history then it is because we don’t know any history.

So I began to try and learn my own history, and I did it in exactly the same way as I learnt my way around contemporary London. You hear a man talking about a pub, or you read an address in a paper, or sometimes you simply follow someone you fancy and discover a whole new part of town. You know that your knowledge is quite arbitrary. Your knowledge of the city is shaped by the way ex-lovers introduce you to their friends, by the way you hear someone’s story simply because he happened to be in the same place as you at the same time. And eventually you build up a network of places and people, perhaps you discover a particular group of people, or you look for, or accidentally find, one man who focuses your life. I moved from clue to clue, from name to name and from book to book. I started collecting pictures and anecdotes. I bought four big scrapbooks and filled them with whatever texts or images I could find from the London of a hundred years ago. I went back to the picture galleries and museums I used to haunt when I was sixteen. Gradually I began to learn the geography and language of 1895 or 1881, to redraw my map of the city, to recognize certain signs, certain words. I began to see this other London as the beginning of my own story — and up till then, like a lot of other men, I’d seen America and 1970 as the start of everything (xxi).
Identities

The book that resulted from Bartlett’s practice of cruising the archive retains the form of a collage, mingling fragments of a personal diary with historical documents, reflections on gay life, social and literary analysis, letters, and an insistently, disturbingly complicitous address to the reader. Indeed, “the scrapbook,” Bartlett tells us, “is the true form of our history, since it records what we remember, and embodies in its omissions both how we remember and how we forget our lives. We are always held between ignorance and exposure” (99).

* * *

Just as Bartlett taught himself how to be gay first by matching his life with the patterns of other gay men around him and, then, in “another variation on the same strategy,” began to match the patterns of his life with those of just one other gay man, so in his archival research did he shift from building up “a network of places and people” to finding one historical figure in particular who came to focus his sense of what it meant to be gay. “If a stranger asked you to name a homosexual, would you give your own name in reply?” he inquired. “Or if you asked someone else, your sister, for instance, or your father, to name a homosexual, what would their response be? There is one, just one, whose name everyone knows. In fact he is famous above all else for being a homosexual” (26). In London, in the 1980s, that person was Oscar Wilde. Wilde’s trial in 1895 and his subsequent conviction for the crime of “gross indecency” had sensationaly and indelibly branded him with the mark of homosexual identity, making him for years to come the known and public face of that otherwise secret

* * *

Исто како што Бартлет со поклонување на својот живот со шемите на другите геј мажи около него се учел себеси како да биде геј, а потоа, во „друга варијација на истата стратегија“, почнал да ги поклонува шемите на својот живот со тие на само еден друг геј маж, така, и во неговото архивско истражување, се префрил од „изградување на мрежа на места и лица“ до наоѓање на една конкретна историска личност која го фокусираше неговото чувство за тоа што значи да си геј. „Доколку некој непознат побара да му наведеш некој хомосексуалец, дали како одговор би му го дал сопственото име?“, праша тој. „Или доколку прашате некој друг, вашата сестра, на пример, или вашиот татко, да наведат некој хомосексуалец, што би одговориле тие? Има еден, само еден, чие име им е познато на сите. Всушност, тој е најпознат по тоа што е хомосексуалец“ (26). Во Лондон, во 1980-тите, тоа лице било Оскар Вајлд. Судењето на Вајлд во 1895 година и неговото последователно осудување за кривично дело „сериозна недоличност“ на сенза-
ционален и недвојден начин го брендираа со белегот на хомосексуален иденitet, вообликувајки го него за многу следни години во познатото и јавно лице на тој инаку таен и неизустлив порок. Како и Гертруда Штајн, чие име функционираше во популарната култура на Соединените Американски Држави во текот на 1950-ите години како шифра за лезбејство (збор којшто би било недолично отворено да се изговори), Оскар Вајлд, откако така спектакуларно - ако не и трагично – бил изведен пред британските судови, го позајмил своeto име на цел сексуален вид.

Бартлет бил свесен за многуте начини на кои Вајлд не се вклопувал во моделот на геј иденitet создаден на улиците и во клубовите и помеѓу членовите на активистичките групи низ Лондон по геј либерализацијата. Но, Бартлет не се обидувал да идентификува „претставител“ геј маж. Уште помалку барал модел за угледување – а најмалку „позитивна претстава“ за макара хомосексуалност. Тој се обидувал да ја научи собствената историја. А, не можеш секогаш да ја одбиращ собствената историја.

Бертлет веќе знаел дека е хомосексуалец. Но, како што ке каже Едмонд Вајт (Edmund White), тој е несигурен во импликациите. Тој почнал да се гледува дека да се биде геј не е само ненамерна состојба, туку цел начин на живеење, со свои традиции, собствена историја, но тој не разбрав како точно неговиот живот бил во врска со нив. Дали ли го живеел правилно? Што е хомосексуалец, каков е геј животот: тоа веќе било дефинирано — историски, популарно, претенциозно, авторитативно, канонски, за подобро или за полошо — со лично за Носкар Вајлд.

Бартlett was aware of the many ways that Wilde did not fit the model of gay identity that was being invented on the streets and in the clubs and among the members of the activist groups around London in the wake of gay liberation. But Bartlett was not trying to identify a “representative” gay man. Much less was he looking for a role model—let alone a “positive image” of male homosexuality. He was trying to learn his own history. And you cannot always choose your history.

Бартlett already knew he was homosexual. But, as Edmund White would say, he was unsure of the implications. He had begun to realize that being gay is not just an involuntary condition but an entire way of life with its own traditions, its own history, but he didn’t understand exactly how his own life related to them. Or whether he was living it right. What a homosexual is, what a gay life is like: that had already been defined—historically, popularly, flamboyantly, authoritatively, canonically, for better or for worse—by the personage of Oscar Wilde.

And so Bartlett attempted to figure out if there was anything in Wilde’s life or work that might correspond to his own experience, anything that he could recognize
искуство, нешто што би можел да го препознае како свое. Дали тој и Вајлд имале нешто заедничко? Кога би можеле да се сретнат, би можеле ли да разговараат? Бартлет се обидел да ја доволи вселата. За да разбере што значи да се биде геј, тој се вдал да открие што, ако воопшто нешто, тој би можел да има заедничко со најпознатиот геј маж од сите, со мажот чијшто пример поставил постојан репер за британските мажи од тој момент натаму.

Така, кога не висел по барови и клубови, Бартлет почнал своето слободно време да го поминува во библиотеката, дружејќи се со мртвите. Ископал сè што можел да најде за Вајлд, за тоа како Вајлд и други геј мажи живеле во минатото, и на тој начин се обидел да го доволи субјективното искусување на бивањето геј, и во деновите на Вајлд и во неговото сопствено време. Бидејќи, да се прашува, како што тој постојано прашувал, „Каков маж бил тој?“ (xxii, 223-25), било да се зафати со работа на спецификарирење на геј кое по своите предизвици и компликации не се разликува од обидот да се дефинира што значи да се биде геј во сопственото време и простор на Бартлет: „Односно, какви мажи бевме ние?“ (223). Забележете дека Бартлет внимателно одбрал да пишувва во минато време кога зборува за својата сопствена генерација за да нагласи дека веќе исчезнувала езгистенцијата на светот којшто го опишувал, веќе бил дел од историјата и во моментите кога пишувал за него. Резултатот од истражите испитувања на Бартлет бил впечатлително поетично, префинето и оригинално дело, издадено во 1988 година и досетливо наслоено Кој беше јој човек? Подарок за г-н Оскар Вајлд (Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde).

In the course of trying to tell us what kind of man Oscar Wilde was, so as to describe what kind of men “we” were, Bartlett touched on some aspects of what I have been
calling gay male subjectivity. Which is my reason for
devoting so much attention to his deceptively forthright
and accessible book. As Bartlett, or one of his personae,
says at the outset, brilliantly refusing to supply an
antecedent for what thereby remains a strategically
unspecified and impersonal neuter pronoun, “I wanted
to write a book about what it feels like, because I think
that’s what people always want to know, really, what
does it feel like...” (xix; also 100, 126). Bartlett’s project
is nothing less than an attempt to describe gay male
subjectivity, to specify what it feels like—I will spell
it out—to be gay, to live a gay life, to be different from
straight people, to share a queer existence, to be part of
a gay culture.8

II

To describe gay male subjectivity by matching your
experiences against the patterns of feeling revealed by
other gay men, past and present, means observing both
correspondences and differences. It is not a question of
deriving an authoritative knowledge of what it means to
be gay from one model or set of models but of situating
one’s own experience uneasily in relation to other lives
that both do and do not mirror it. Bartlett’s relation to
Wilde, for example, turned out to be very much like his
relation to other gay men in his own day. It was a study
in ambivalence. That much is evident from a chapter
titled “Messages,” which consists of two unsigned
letters to Wilde, very different from each other in emotion
and tone.
The first letter begins, “Dear Oscar.” It presents itself as having been composed on the evening of the letter writer’s return from Paris, where he had placed flowers on Wilde’s grave. The writer is still flush with the emotion of the day, and not a little drunk. He makes it clear how close he feels to Wilde, how much he identifies with him:

I got dressed up. I made myself just as handsome as I could, so handsome that the men would look at me on the journey. I made a point of buying the roses from the florist in the Burlington Arcade (remember?) and then when I got to Paris I walked straight to the grave and laid them down with all the other flowers looking just as strong as I could, stood there with a smile on my face and I didn’t cry once. I smoked a whole cigarette for you and then turned and went (211).

The reader is allowed to smile at the writer’s sincerity, transparent love of drama, and high-pitched sensibility, even while being touched by his passionate tribute.

The writer of this letter, though tenderly devoted to the memory of Wilde, “martyr and hero” (34), does not ignore the changes that have taken place in British society and in gay male life in the hundred years that separate the two of them. On the contrary, part of the writer’s pleasure in honoring Wilde derives from the satisfaction of knowing that things have improved, that he can now live the life that Wilde would have wanted for himself.

That smug but guilty sensation of coming into Wilde’s legacy while going well beyond him, living out his aspirations while escaping his fate and transcending his pathos, intensifies the writer’s sentimentality.
Душо, сето тоа е за тебе. Сето ова го правиме за тебе. Посакувам да можеше да бидеш тука да не видиш. Улиците не се толку многу различни – не би се загубил – но ние сме многу различни деновиве. Можеш ли да замислиш, вечерка се прошетав по Странд со мојот љубовник и зборување во кој паб да одиме и да пиеме; имаме избор на места за одене и веројатно е дека кога ќе стигнеме таму, никој нема да не познава. И тогаш ме прегрна преку рамото. Претпоставувам дека тоа се тие движења, јавни и невпечатливи, во кои никогаш не си можел да уживаш... Тежината на рамото на љубовникот на твоето рамо не е повеќе сензација во која некогаш би можел да уживаш, ништо не би можело да се мери со тоа што ти било сторено тебе, тоа ништо не може да го смени, но ах, речиси и да успева во тоа (211-12).

Идентификувањето на писателот со Вајлд не се заснова на одбивање на разликата. Доколку писателот се идентификува со Вајлд, тоа не е поради тоа што смета дека се идентично исти за тоа што се геј мажи. Неговата сензитивност не е израз на слеп есенцијализам. На против, во име на својата генерација на геј мажи тој инсистира дека „деновиве, ние сме многу различни“. Неговото идентификување со Вајлд го засводува јазот помеѓу историската и социјалната разлика, наоѓајќи точки на сличности кои му дозволуваат да се замислува себе си како да ги исполнува амбициите на Вајлд за себеси и за геј животот, дури и надминувајќи ги.

Тука малку се провлекува сисходливост, малку самочестито на сметка на Вајлд. Вајлд служи како аршин со кој писателот го мери триумфалниот напредок на сопствената генерација, огромната далекина којашто ја поминал геј животот во посредувачкиот век. (Тој мисли дури дека неговата сопствена срека „рециси“ надоместува за страдањето на Вајлд!) Тогаш, во самата срценина на овој омаж за Вајлд демне импулс за деидентификација веќе

Darling, it’s all for you. We’re doing all this for you. I wish you could be here to see us. The streets are not all that different — you wouldn’t get lost — but we are very different these days. Can you imagine, tonight I walked down the Strand with my lover, and we talked about which pub we would go and drink in; we have a choice of places to go now, and the chances are that when we get there no one will know us. And then he put his arm around my shoulder. I suppose it’s gestures like that, public and unremarkable, that you could never enjoy... The weight of a lover’s arm on your shoulder is not a sensation you can ever enjoy now, nothing can ever be worth what was done to you, nothing can change that, but oh it almost does (211-12).

The writer’s identification with Wilde is not founded on a denial of difference. If the writer identifies with Wilde, it’s not because he considers that as gay men they are exactly the same. His sentimentality is not the expression of a blind essentialism. On the contrary, he insists on behalf of his generation of gay men that “we are very different these days.” His identification with Wilde arcs across the gap of historical and social difference, finding points of commonality that allow him to imagine himself as fulfilling Wilde’s ambitions for himself and for gay life, even surpassing them.

Here a little condescension creeps in, a bit of self-congratulation at Wilde’s expense. Wilde serves as a yardstick by which the writer measures his own generation’s triumphant progress, the vast distance gay life has traveled in the intervening century. (He even thinks his own happiness “almost” makes up for Wilde’s suffering!) At the very heart, then, of this homage to Wilde lurks an impulse to disidentification already implicit in the writer’s complacent celebration of the modern
implied in the writer's self-satisfied slavement to modern possibilities for gay existence that Wilde himself could not enjoy ("Can you imagine..."). The writer nonetheless persists in defining his own identity in complex relation to Wilde, figuring himself as Wilde’s inheritor, successor, champion, redeemer—and as embodying the fulfillment of Wilde’s historical potential.

The second letter sounds rather different. “Oscar, you fat bitch,” it begins. “Last night I dreamed your hand was on my face. You were there in the bed, big and fat like I’ve been told you were, lying in bed smoking and taking up all the room” (212). It concludes, “I don’t pity you. I don’t even want to ask your advice... You old queen, you’ve got your hand on my face, I can’t talk now” (213).

It turns out once again, though, that the letter writer’s relation to Wilde is more complicated than his tone might at first lead one to expect. The writer is disgusted by Wilde, but also moved by him, and desirous of a connection with him. His complaint is not only that Wilde takes up too much space; it is also that, having left the writer scant room of his own, Wilde yields so little of himself.

You said nothing but kept on smoking... So I got up and put on the light and fetched you an ashtray and waited for you to talk... Once the light was on I wasn’t embarrassed, really, by your body. You didn’t try to cover yourself. You are old, and fat, and white, and you sweat slightly. You’re an old queen; you are quite beyond being embarrassed by a younger man, quite capable of taking in the details of my body (I had half
an erection swinging when I went to get the ashtray from the kitchen) without desire or inhibition. So I came back into the bed and sat close. I thought, having read about you, that you might want to run your fingers through my hair. I know I’m not blonde [like Lord Alfred Douglas, the love of Wilde’s life], and that I don’t look like a boy any more now that I’ve made myself look like a man, but I still thought that you might want to touch me. I thought you might want something from me. I thought I might have something to give you. I leaned against your shoulder and waited.

I wanted you to talk; I would have listened to anything you might have said. I would have held you if you’d wanted me to. I would have talked or listened all night. After all, I’ve done that for a lot of other men. I would have done anything; masturbated in front of you, or let you do anything you wanted.

And you said nothing, you didn’t even look at me half the time. You smoked. Your eyes were dead, your fat white flesh was sweating slightly and quite dead... I supposed that they had finally managed to kill you. To reduce you to this...

Please, say anything at all to me, and I can use it (212-13).

If this fantasized relationship with Wilde seems less edifying than the previous one, that is partly because it is more intimate. The writer finds himself in physical contact with Wilde, imagines him as a palpable presence and not just as a historical precursor or political forerunner or sainted martyr. To be sure, Wilde remains an enigma, baffling in his strangeness and distance: “I realized that I had no idea what your voice would sound like” (212). But Wilde’s stubborn remoteness is also an effect of the letter writer’s yearning to enter into a relation of reciprocal exchange with him, for which purpose the writer would...
nego da vleze vo odnos na recipro~na razmena, za
kojashto cel avtorot bi bil soglasen da ja nadminhe
svojata seksualna odvratnost – navista, se bi
stiril za odgovor.

He would do anything for a response.

Wilde’s most repulsive feature is not his bloated body but
his deadness, his indifference, his refusal either to give or
to receive. This Wilde has no interest in being rescued by
the younger generation, but neither will he get out of its
way.9 He remains a massive presence, and he allows the
writer no complacency, no sense of triumph. Maybe “we”
don’t belong together, after all. Maybe there is nothing
to say. Wilde’s silence threatens to become the writer’s
own.

The contrast between the two letters, then, consists in
nothing so simple as the difference between identification
and disidentification, desire and disgust, continuity and
discontinuity with the gay male past. It has to do at
least as much with “what it feels like” to touch the past,
to bring oneself into contact with a queer history that
both is and is not one’s own.10 Bartlett never “abjects”
Wilde in Julia Kristeva’s sense of recoiling in horror
from a part of himself that he can never successfully
jettison.11 The play of identification and disidentification
intricately structures each of his letters to Wilde. In
each Bartlett transacts his own negotiation of historical
sameness and difference in a variety of idioms and tones.
In this demonstration of the many emotional registers
in which gay men might “speak to one another, in our
own language,” Bartlett evokes a gay male commonality
in which identification does not require the erasure
of difference and disidentification stops far short of
rejection.
After all, both letters to Wilde close with “Love.” Both are to be understood in their own ways as love letters. Our quests for gay origins may proceed from various needs and aim at various goals, but they are all, equally, acts of love. This love which need not and does not exclude ambivalence corresponds to Bartlett’s queer model of a collective gay identity that cannot and need not exclude difference.

The complexly ambivalent attitude to Wilde expressed by the juxtaposition of those two letters extends to Bartlett’s entire relation to Wilde throughout the rest of his book as well as to his relation to gay history, to gay society in the present, and to gay male subjectivity. (The literary technique of collage is the perfect vehicle for creating and expressing ambivalence.) At one point, for example, Bartlett imagines Wilde as his alter ego, with Wilde’s initiation into metropolitan queer culture anticipating and exactly replicating his own. “Like me, he didn’t always live in London. He moved there in 1879, and then he too had to learn how to live here, he had to learn the signs. So it’s the same story” (57). Wilde’s experience, it appears, speaks directly to gay men of Bartlett’s generation: his works “were written for us and for us alone, and only we can truly understand them. We belong together, don’t you think?” (36).
At other moments, Bartlett discerns in Wilde’s entry into the sexual underworld of Victorian London “merely the overweight cynical ease with which an economically privileged man can and does lead a homosexual life in London without having to pay more than money for it... [H]e was no heroic victim, but a man lying and laughing his way out of acknowledging the realities of this city” (33). So it’s not the same story at all—or, at least, it’s not the story that Bartlett likes to think of himself as repeating, even if he sometimes finds it to be rather too close to his own experience for comfort.

Any and all identification with Wilde expresses “a peculiarly gay vanity” in any case, according to Bartlett. It is a wishful fantasy, an illusion that Bartlett likes to entertain despite knowing better, “just as I go out to drink in order to forget my differences with the other men in the bar and to enjoy the simple fact of our shared experience, to enjoy the pleasure of crossing eyes in a mirror, the great pleasure to be found in the way we look standing side by side” (35).

Even so, Bartlett is perfectly well aware that Wilde can hardly represent all gay men, any more than Bartlett himself can. “Why should I canonize only one man, anathemize him, record only one biography as ‘typical’? No one man can guide me around this city... I’d rather talk about some ordinary queen I know, I’d rather relate the story of some man I’ve met, describe the face of some dancer or beauty. A book which gives a picture of that part of my history which is called ‘Oscar Wilde’ would have to include all these stories and others besides” (30).
And so Bartlett tried to include them. Yet he kept coming back to Oscar Wilde.

Bartlett’s attitude to gay history is similarly conflicted. On the one hand, he wants his gay history to be inclusive. “I am fascinated by everyone. I suppose I treat past lives with this curious and indiscriminate respect because I want to know everyone’s story” (99). On the other hand, each new discovery indicates to Bartlett how little he knows, how much of the gay past has been irretrievably lost, how invisible our history has always been. Speaking of one informant, he writes, “When I find traces of his life, and of other lives, I’m not sure how to react, whether to celebrate, or turn away and look out of the window like he did, angry, angry that all these stories have been forgotten” (129).

Bartlett’s ambivalence is especially pronounced whenever he uncovers traces of gay existence in official documents that were drawn up by the authorities in order to be used against us. He is thrilled to find proof of the gay past, but he warns his reader not to “get excited. These records aren’t meant for you. They are evidence. They aren’t meant to inform us of anything; they are there to help form a verdict. They weren’t written so that we could identify ourselves, imagine ourselves, remember ourselves, understand the contradictions or pleasures of Wilde’s life” (158).
Many of the historical documents Bartlett quotes were composed in order to establish the truth of our nature, according to the homophobic standards of the time. In that sense, they were intended to silence us and to suppress the details of our lives, the kind of details that really matter to us now. “What I want are the details,” Bartlett laments. “Details are the only things of interest” (159).

Moreover, “this ‘evidence’ raises important questions about our own attitude to our own history. Do we view it with dismay, since it is a record of sorrow, of powerlessness, a record of lives wrecked? Or is it possible to read even these texts, written as they were by journalists, policemen and court clerks, with delight, as precious traces of dangerous, pleasurable, complicated gay lives?” (129). Bartlett does not presume it will ever be possible to resolve our ambivalence and give a definite answer to that question. Which is why he left it open.

* * *

I have wanted to convey Bartlett’s ambivalence to Wilde and the gay past in general, to illustrate the delicate suspension with which his attitude hovers between dismay and delight, because that indeterminacy in his outlook is the key to understanding how he uses gay history to approach the problem of gay male subjectivity.
If Bartlett was able—despite his insistence on how untypical he was, how unrepresentative Wilde had been, how different gay men are from each other—to find some points of convergence between his own life and Wilde’s, between his life and the lives of other gay men past and present, that is precisely because all he set out to do was to “match [his] life with the patterns of other men around [him],” to enjoy “the way we look standing side by side.” He did not presume that we are all the same, that there is some intrinsic or organic connection among us. He did not try to resolve the question of whether “we really belong to each other, belong together.” He noted the similarities that happened to appear, and to form consistent, coherent pictures, when he matched his life with the patterns of other men that he discerned in the historical record. But he did not attempt to consolidate the resulting configurations into essences. The patterns he discovered are not necessary. But neither are they purely accidental. They are contingent—contingent on certain social forms, certain regularities, grounded in both an enduring and a shifting cultural logic.

Here we see the crucial role that history plays in Bartlett's effort to capture “what it feels like,” to bring into precise but provisory focus the cloudy constellations of gay identity, gay culture, and gay subjectivity. By looking to history for a definition of gay male existence, Bartlett was relying not on theoretical propositions but on social processes. He was able in this way to identify certain correspondences and similitudes, yet without having to endorse them. And then, on the basis of the regularities he observed, he could make certain generalizations, without turning them into laws, requirements, obligatory standards that all gay men have to meet in order to be gay.
vo zakoni, услови, задолжителни стандарди кон сите геј мажи мора да ги исполнуваат за да бидат геј.

Најпосле, исцртувањето на шемите не е опишување на сингуларниот, унитарниот идентитет или субјективитет, а уште помалку инсистирање дека сите геј мажи мора да го искажуваат. „Следниот пат кога некој маж ќе ме праша какво е чувството, ќе ги спојам сите овие фрагменти и ќе му ги позајмам за една нок и тогаш ќе го прашам дали, читајќи ги, се чувствувал исто како и јас“ (100). Тоа е понудата која завршената книга на Бартлет сè уште им ја нуди на читателите. Книгата не е обид да се прогласи и да се применува само една дефиниција за геј идентитетот, геј субјективитетот или геј културата. Таа не е наметнување, туку покана. Тоа што му овозможува на Бартлет да генерализира за геј искуството без да го претвори во закон е неизвесната природа на самата геј историја која му ја дава слободата и да биде амбивалентен во однос на геј минатото и да го сака без оглед на тешкотите и ужасите.

To draw out patterns, after all, is not to describe a singular, unitary identity or subjectivity, much less to insist that all gay men manifest it. “The next time some man asks me what it feels like, I’ll bind all these fragments together and lend them to him for a night, and then ask him if he felt the same way reading them as I did” (100). That is the offer Bartlett’s completed book still holds out to its readers. The book is not an effort to promulgate and enforce a single definition of gay identity, gay subjectivity, or gay culture. It is not an imposition but an invitation. What enables Bartlett to generalize about gay experience without legislating it is the contingent nature of gay history itself, which also allows him the freedom both to be ambivalent about the gay past and to love it despite its heartbreak and its horrors.

III

„За нас“, пишува Бартлет, „минатото не крее терори доколу не се плашиме да пристапиме, да бидеме видени во друштвото на нашите ’проколнати’, нашите осудени претходници. Затоа што не се може да пребираме и одбираме од богатствата на нашата историја и на градот. Во која/кои традиција/традиции се ставаш себе си — а со тоа мислам на тоа кој стил најмногу ти одговара?“ (208). Поради тоа што можеме да прибираме и одбираме од минатото, можеме и да се повикуваме на историјата за утврдување на координатите на геј идентитетот и култура, координати кои не се ограничувачки затоа што не се фиксни. Тие остануваат мобилни сè додека и понатаму

III

“For us,” Bartlett writes, “the past holds no terrors, if we are not afraid of joining, of being seen in the company of our ‘doomed’, our condemned ancestors. For we may pick and choose from the riches of our history and of the city. Which tradition(s) do you place yourself in — by which I mean which style suits you best?” (208). It is because we may pick and choose from the past that we can draw upon history to establish the coordinates of a gay identity and culture, coordinates that are not constraining because they are not fixed. They remain mobile, insofar as we can always reassemble and rearrange them when we want to redefine who we are.
In this way, we can turn to history in order to describe gay identity or gay culture without embalming it. All we have to do is look at ourselves closely, and we will then see that we are in fact constantly keeping company with our gay ancestors, although we may not realize it. “Watching that man in the high-heeled shoes, the black dress falling off one shoulder (it is late in the evening), I remember that he and his sisters have been making their own way as ladies of the night since 1870, when Fanny and Stella [Frederick William Park and Ernest Boulton, Victorian drag queens arrested on April 28, 1870] were doing the Strand. His frock is handed down, second-hand, part of a story, part of a tradition” (223; cf. 129-44). What is crucial for us to recognize about such traditions is that whereas our practices may mimic those of our ancestors, the meaning of our practices has not been determined once and for all by them.
Our traditions so as to make them do a different kind of social and cultural work from the work they did in the past.

And that man buying his younger boyfriend (slightly embarrassed, but happily drunk) another drink — I remember the bizarre twisting of mythologies that Wilde used to justify his adoration of young men, the mixing of a pastiche of Classical paederasty with a missionary zeal for “the criminal classes”, the sense that they, not the boys he left sleeping in [his home in] Chelsea, were his true sons—should I forget all that, should I be embarrassed myself? Should I look the other way? Should I dismiss all that simply because now, as then, one man is paying for another? Isn’t there an attempt to create a new kind of relationship, an affair of the heart somehow appropriate to the meeting of two very different men? That’s our real history, the one we’re still writing (223).

To place ourselves in historical traditions, which we do all the time without knowing it (according to Bartlett), is not necessarily to fix forever the meaning of our actions or to replay in their entirety the social forms of the past. It is therefore not incompatible with continuing to invent ourselves.

* * * 

It all depends on how you look at history. Is it a record of dynamic change, or does it tell us who we are? Does history serve to confirm us in our present identity by reflecting back to us our current image of ourselves, or does it allow us to imagine forms of existence undreamt of in our own day? “There is a very specific gay sense of history,” writes Bartlett disapprovingly, “in which nothing really happens
until such time as you identify yourself as a gay man” (221). Such an attitude to history is understandable, but not very helpful, because it effectively abolishes history itself, making the past nothing but a back-formation of our present identity, a projection into the past of who we are now, which then has the effect of fixing us in our current definition of ourselves and determining once and for all who we are.

Bartlett ventriloquizes that attitude as follows:

Since I have my pleasures now, they must be enough, I must be exhausted by them and sleep contentedly at night. And more than that, how could we change? How could we ever change, now that we have become, at last, homosexual. We have invested everything not in doing something, but in being something... Having worked so long and so hard to achieve this identity, there is little reason to scrutinize it, to poke around in it for possible sites of adjustment and alteration. We remake history in our image, rather than looking to our history as a source of doubts and hopes (218).

Even as he allows for the attractions of this kind of history, Bartlett lobbies for a more dynamic sense of the gay past, for a vision of history as a site of difference, a record of change, a ground of future transformation.

Entering history like this can feel like entering a bar for the first time; it takes your breath away. Breathless, we could assemble a whole cast of new acquaintances, a whole library of costume dramas moving from, say, a drag party in 1725 to a uniformed wartime romance put into impressive chiar-
uniformed war romance set against impressively kiaroskuro with the fires of the Blitz, finding in each place glamorous evidence of gay lives to make us feel that others have been here before us, that others have been oppressed, others have been as brilliant or inventive as us. If we were all ever to meet, surely it would be a wonderful party. But this history is not a record of change; the sensation it creates matches that of moving from one bar to another, one night to another. We abolish time and distance, difference, in exclaiming, *Oh! he’s just like us*. We refuse the task (and pleasure) of identifying where he is like us, where he differs. We admire his face, but we don’t want to talk to him in case he has the wrong accent (217).

Fortunately, though, that kind of history—ostensibly all-inclusive but really predicated on exclusionary principles, on very strict criteria for who should be allowed to pass through the turnstile and enter the club—is not the only option.

Bartlett’s own example demonstrates that it is possible to write a gay history “in our own language,” all the while highlighting both its correspondences with and its differences from present-day gay lives. Bartlett demonstrates this, in particular, by comparing gay history to a gay bar. Without requiring any background in post-modernism on the part of his reader, Bartlett manages to convey to gay men of his generation, by means of that comparison, his basic point about identity and difference, his critique of essentialism, his objection to a naive version of identity politics and his refusal to view gay history through the lens of a stabilized gay identity.
Not all history has to have the form of a coming-out story, “which ends with the statement, ‘I am gay.’” (23)—a story in which the acquisition of a fully fledged gay identity constitutes the culmination of the plot and puts a complete stop to the forward movement of the narrative.\(^\text{13}\)

Even “Wilde seems to have realized that an individual admission that a man is a homosexual, that he is guilty (Are you gay then?), does not conclude his history, but begins it” (161). In the changed social conditions of the late 1980s, in the midst of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the triumph of the New Right, it was no longer possible to believe that gay history came to a stop with the post-Stonewall generation. “Our history now becomes a way of understanding and exploring the change in our culture, not simply of reading it as an ‘end’” (221).

From this perspective, a man buying his younger boyfriend another drink is not necessarily a mere recapitulation of archaic and unchanging forms of social hierarchy, of upper-class sexual privilege and working-class semi-prostitution. The meanings are not the same, just because the procedure involves one man paying for another. Differences in age and wealth may actually be serving new, dynamic social functions, creating possibilities for novel kinds of relationships among men who are asymmetrically situated according to conventional class hierarchies but are being brought into approximate equality by the reciprocal exchanges of contemporary gay life.\(^\text{14}\)

Money, after all, does not possess a single meaning in each and every transaction. In this case, it may be an element that serves to further the leveling of class barriers rather than simply consolidating them and enforcing

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Ne mora seta istorija da ima forma na prikazna na izleguvawenja, „kojashto završuva so izjavata, ‘Jaš sum gej’“ (23) – prikazna vo koja steknuvajuveno propisen gej identitet prestatuvuva kulminacija na prikanzata mu stava celosen kraj na naprednoto dvijeñe na naracijata.\(^\text{13}\) I „Vajld se ~ini deka sfatil deka individualnoto priznanie deka ~ovek e homoseksualc, deka toj e vinoven (Togaš, dali se tine gej?), ne ja završuva negovata istorija, tuku ja po~nuva“ (161). Vo izmenetite socijalni uslovi vo do~nite 80-ti, srede epidemiijata na HIV/CIĐA i triumfot na Novoto pravo, povèêe ne e mo~no da se veruva deka gej historijata prestanala so poststanvolskata (Stonewall) generacija. „Cega nashata istorija stanuva na~in na razbirawe i istra`uvawe na promenata vo nashata kulutura, ne nejzino prosto ~itawe kako ‘kraj‘“ (221).

Od ova perspektiva, mаж kojšto na svojot pomlad ljubovnik mu kupuva u{te eden pijalak, ne e nuzno prosta rekapitulacija na arha~nih i nepromenlivi formi na socijalna xi{erarkhija, na seksualna privillegija na gornta klasa i polu-prostuticija na robotnichkata klasa. Znaceñata ne se isti samo poradi toa ~to postapkata vkluchuva mаж kojšto mu pla{a na drug. Razlikite vo vozrasta i bogatstvoto mogebi sega vresh novi, dinamichni socijalni funkcii, szoekavajki mo`nosti za novi vidovi na odnosi pom{u mazhte ko~ se asemetri~no situirani sposano konvencionalnite klasni xi{erarkhi, no se doveduvaat do pribljuna e~nakvost so reciprocniite razmene vo sovremeniot gej `ivot.\(^\text{14}\)

Na{poste, parite ne soderjat samo edno mislenje vo sekoi tansaksija. Vo ovoj slu~aj, toa poprvo mo`e da e element kojšto slu`i za ponatamo~no izramnuvanje na klasnite barieri otolku samo
inequality. In that sense, Bartlett could claim that the man and his boyfriend, though they might recall Wilde and his “bizarre twisting of mythologies” to justify and ennoble his own exercise of social power, need not be seen as embarrassing throwbacks to the bad old days of Victorian class exploitation. They might be contributing a new chapter to the ongoing, evolving saga of gay history by devising new ways for men to meet and to relate to each other across the gulf of social difference—drawing strategically on the very category of “gay identity” and its stubborn essentialism in order to level social hierarchies and replace them with novel opportunities for social solidarity.

* * *

From the right perspective, then, gay history does not fix the current form of our identity and project it back into the past. Instead, it is “a source of doubts and hopes,” a site of possible “adjustments” and “alterations.” It enables the ongoing work of gay self-invention. Much as we resemble our nineteenth-century ancestors, who also “wanted to believe that they had existed before, ... we now stand in a very different relation both to our own gay past and to the history of the dominant culture around us. Our lives, simply, have never been like this before. Our characteristic activity is not the consumption and recycling of the past; we are actively engaged in the production of our own culture on a large scale” (226-27).
To be sure, “all this does not mean that we have left behind the older city in which we were created. Many of its structures and languages remain just as surely as its streets and façades. We have not passed from a darkness, the darkness in which a fantasy of our future was bred, the fiction of our existence conjured, into the clear light of that future — our present — in which administration and politics replace history and artistry. We remain unlikely, fictional; we continue to produce and reproduce ourselves. Now, however, our power to imagine ourselves is of a different order. How shall we rewrite our history, our lives?” (228)

One way to rewrite them is to turn to history itself, but with the sense of freedom and choice that Bartlett urged on us. In that way, we can use history, as Bartlett did, to define gay subjectivity without essentializing it.

Sekako, „сето ова не значи дека не сме го оставиле зад нас постариот град во кој сме биле создадени. Многу од неговата структура и јазик остануваат исто толку сигурно како и неговите улици и фасади. Ние не сме преминале од мракот, мракот во кој растеше фантазијата за нашата идина, фикцијата на нашето постоене беше повикувана, во јасната светлина на таа идина — нашата сегашност — во која администрација и политика ги заменуваат историјата и уметноста. Остануваме неверојатни, фиктивни; продолжуваме да се продуцираме и репродуцираме себеси. Сепак, нашата моќ да се замислиме себеси е сега од поинаков ред. Како да ги препишеме нашата историја, нашите животи?“ (228)

Еден начин да ги препишеме е да ѝ се обратиме на самата историја, но со чувство на слобода и избор кој Бартлет ни го наметна. На тој начин можеме да ја користиме историјата, како што направил Бартлет, за дефинирање на таа субјективноста без нејзино осуштествување.

Никогаш нема да знаеш каков човек бил, или е, доколку остане сликата на сидот, икона. Примени ги на овие мажи, на привлечностите на историјата, истите практични методи кои би ги користел во разновиден наполнетиот бар. Признај ги твојот интерес, твојата позиција, твојата глед. Погледни ги внимателно... историјата е исто така натрупана; кога еднаш ќе почнеш да гледаш, улиците на Лондон се фреквентни, одвлекувачки, натрупани со анедоти и инциденти. Оваа просторија содржи необично различни мажи. Знаеш дека нема каква обврска да одбереш само еден љубовник, или да сочиниш едно идеално тело, или да се обликуваш себе си во закритата на еден уледен пример. Одберете, уредете, препишете, прекомпонирајте; растресете ги вашите предадености додека не добиетеш што сакате. Кој го привлекува вашето внимание? До кого стоите? Што ви привлекува и што ве одбива? Чија приказна ви интригира? (225)
This is gay history as a source of queer pleasure and freedom, history open to the play of desire, history as an invitation and opportunity to do whatever feels good. Such a model of history cannot generate a system of norms, because it is constituted from the outset not by generally applicable standards but by individual kinks. It is alien in its very structure and spirit to considerations of the normal and the pathological. As an approach to gay male subjectivity, it stands utterly apart from psychology.

Bartlett’s historical project is descriptive, not prescriptive or normative. It is too late to prescribe codes of conduct and healthy functioning to the dead. They are beyond the reach of our ability to dictate to them, to edify them, to console them, to improve them, to therapize them, to get them to butch up. They are what they were. They may have been benighted, selfish, disgusting, immoral, misguided; we may be embarrassed by them, dismayed by their politics, envious of their social position—or of their clothes. Bartlett made it clear that he often felt a number of those emotions. He unblinkingly and deliberately brought forward pitiable, disappointing, shocking (if sometimes exciting) incidents from the gay past. We may not approve of them, but our approval is no longer required, nor is it relevant. We cannot change the past, and since we are not forever determined by it, we don’t need to resent it or to feel imprisoned by it, which means we don’t need to reject, disclaim, or deny it. We can afford, rather, to live with it, to take it on as part of our history, and as part of ourselves, even to love it, precisely because we have our own lives, which are not ineluctably defined by it. Rather, we have the choice, the freedom to “pick and choose from the riches of our history” whatever may serve to bring into focus the particularity of our existence in the present or to help us invent our future.
Gay history, according to Bartlett’s conception of it, offers us reference points we can use to orient ourselves and to refine our sense of who we are. It also allows us to differentiate ourselves from one another and from the past, to compare our own ways of life with how people lived before us without having to confound the two. The historical record allows us the possibility of describing and defining specific practices of queer subjectivity by matching our own practices with those of the men we decide to pick out, pick up from that crowd at the bar of the gay past. We don’t have to select just one historical antecedent, after all, or to devise an ideal, a standard for everyone, or to promote a single model, or to posit a unitary, integrated practice of gay male subjectivity. I emphasize practices of subjectivity, because Bartlett’s portrait of the kind of men we were, and are, is composed by observing patterns of social behavior. The account he offers is, as we might expect, entirely inductive, nominalistic, tentative, and untheoretical. Bartlett pieces together “what it feels like” by looking at some specific, distinctive cultural practices that shaped the concrete activities and recorded self-expressions of some gay men. If learning how to be gay is something you do in relation to others, as Bartlett discovered, then the particular subjective condition of being gay must be something you acquire through what you and other gay men do together, through the life that you share with them. Gay subjectivity is not a fixed structure but the
idrugidejmajkiopравитезаедно,прекуживотот
штогосподелуватесновив.Дејсубјективностанеев
фиксираниаструктуратукуефектнаспецифични
имозначенчнипрактики.Таасејавуваколектив
тивнокакорезультатносоцијалнаактивност.Секој
можедабидехомосексуалец,нодаласебидеи
ештоштоможедагоправитесосемасами.Тоаесоцијалечин.

* * *

Дејсубјективностановедятиот
Бартлетоваисторискамедицинцијанедаваат
позитивнивредностикоитребадасживееиек
машкиотживотилиетичкаосноваврзкојаштожмее
dесовправда.Тиерефлексираатделодисторискиите
форми кои гизазелагејегзистенцијата.Тиесеможни,
необходими.Нивнатаосноваевопроменливостана
историјата,невистинатанапсихологијатаили
идентитетот.Тиенесенитудобридитолши.Неиморада
гисакаш.Тиенесекреиранададеопределекаа
вашеодобрување.Едноставно,тиесетоштосе.

Bartlet’s achievement is to describe gay subjectivity in
a language consistently free of normative thinking. History
records how we have lived, it does not tell us how we
should live. It takes us out of the realm of norms. Bartlett
is careful to select for exploration particular practices of
gay male subjectivity that are signally lacking in obvious
moral attraction: he examines forgery, inauthenticity,
inconsistency, repetition, collecting, consumerism,
fantasy, hedonism, and identification with the upper
echelons of society. There is little danger that Bartlett’s
reader will mistake those practices for virtues—or will
mistake Bartlett’s description of them for propaganda
on behalf of some superior gay morality. Bartlett is not
defining gay male existence as it should be, or as it usually
is, or as it would be if it weren’t deformed by oppression,
disfigured by pathology, distorted by deviance. He is
Bartlett goes to great lengths to escape mandatory membership in the gay culture he so lovingly describes. Despite his careful and passionate evocation of other gay lives, he is almost phobically determined to avoid having his own life compulsorily assimilated to them. His ambivalence leads him even to deny the existence of the very group he spends his entire book trying to imagine, to evoke, and to define. As far as he is concerned, he insists, “there is no ‘real’ us” (169).

Bartlett refuses, then, to traffic in speculation about the true nature of gay male subjectivity. There is no such thing for Bartlett as gay existence as it truly is or should be. There is only gay existence as it has existed. The values gay men have cherished are not “gay values” in themselves. That is why no gay man who reads Bartlett’s book feels called upon to endorse or to embrace the values rehearsed in it. We do not have to value them just because other gay men have valued them. After all, not all gay men are the same. Gay men today can assume a freedom in relation to the values that some gay men have cherished in the past. That is something we can do, however, only when those values are presented as historically and socially specific, as values that some gay men have cherished, and that gay men nowadays are free to choose or to reject, and not as gay values in and of themselves.
ги негувале, и кои геј мажите во сегашноста може слободно да ги прифаќаат и отфрлаат, а не како геј вредности во и по себе.\textsuperscript{15}

* * *

Тогаш, тоа што Бартлет ни го нуди во неговата книга за Вајлд е исключително префинета и рафинирана демонстрација на тоа како да се опише геј машка култура преку испитување на сопствената идентификација со други геј мажи при нивна истовремена деидентификација. Бартлет конструира и елаборира верзија на идентификација којашто има еден вид деидентификација вградена во неа сè додека видот на геј идентификацијата којашто тој ја практикува не зависи од постојењето на веќе восставен и усвоен геј идентитет, но не бара ни бришење на разликата. Тоа е модел којшто не се плаши од, туку ја прифаќа амбивалентноста во односите на геј мажите, и минати и сегашни, едни кон други, и тоа не учи како да се сакаме едни со други покрај нашите вкоренети импулси кон деидентификација, кон геј срам – наспроти нашите тенденции да не сакаме да имаме ништо со повеќето геј мажи или да инсистираме да им покажеме дека сме подобри од нив.

На овој начин Бартлет нуди живописен портрет на променливите, емотивно оптоварени и комплицирани пресврти во геј машка идентификација, портрет на пречки кои геј мажите мора да ги надминат за да создадат заедничка култура основана во смисла на колективен идентитет – или да го препознаат или прифатат постојењето на културата којашто веќе ја споделуваат.

Навистина, какви мажи бевме ние?

Превод од англиски јазик: Родна Русковска

What Bartlett offers us in his book on Wilde, then, is an extraordinarily subtle and refined demonstration of how to describe gay male culture through exploring one’s identification with other gay men while disidentifying from them at the same time. Bartlett constructs and elaborates a version of identification that has a kind of disidentification built into it, insofar as the kind of gay identification he practices does not depend on the existence of an already established and perfected gay identity, but neither does it require the erasure of difference. It is a model that does not fear but rather embraces ambivalence in the relations of gay men, both past and present, to one another, and that teaches us how to love each other despite our stubborn, inveterate impulses to disidentification, to gay shame—despite our tendencies to want to have nothing to do with most gay men or to insist on showing them that we are better than they are.

In this way, Bartlett provides a vivid portrait of the volatile, emotionally fraught, and difficult vicissitudes of gay male identification, a portrait of the obstacles that gay men have to overcome in order to create a common culture grounded in a sense of collective identity—or to recognize and accept the existence of the culture they already share.

What kinds of men, indeed, were we?


4. Rimbaud, в писмо Je est un autre („Jac е друг“).

5. Види Chisholm, „City of Collective Memory“, особено 126-27, од каде ја презедов формулата „крстосување на архивата“.

1. Neil Bartlett, *Who Was That Man? A Present for Mr Oscar Wilde* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1988), xix. All further page references to this work will be incorporated in the text. Unless otherwise noted, all italics that appear in quoted extracts from this book are Bartlett’s own.


3. Chisholm, “City of Collective Memory,” 113. Chisholm had pointed out that the “social existence [of lesbians and gay men] is a product of the city itself... [They] owe their emergence to the industrial metropolis, where they were hailed as a new ‘city type’ in police reports and newspaper stories and, no less scandalously, in the first urban poetry (Baudelaire’s Les Fleurs du mal, Whitman’s Leaves of Grass)…” (101).

4. Rimbaud, in a letter, famously declared, *Je est un autre* (“I is another”).

5. See Chisholm, “City of Collective Memory,” esp. 126-27, from whom I have adapted the formula, “cruising the archive.”

7. I am reminded of a recent rock song by Jimmy Street called “Gay Sex Guru” (available on a compilation by Seymour Butz—if that is his real name—and Nick Wales entitled *Gay in the Life: Adventures in Queer Underground* [Melbourne: Odd Man Out Records/Mushroom Records Pty. Ltd., 2000]) which contains the following verses:

```
I have never ever kissed a boy before
I have never entered via the back door
But I want to know, when I do it, will I do it right?
I have never been to no Mardi Gras
I’ve never had the action from near or far
But I want to know, when I go there, will I party right?
Won’t you be my gay sex guru?
Don’t you know there’s a lot I want to learn from you?
I have never boogied with a man before
I’ve never sniffed amyl on the dance floor
But I want to know, when I do it, will I do it right?
I have never dated no leatherman
I’ve never had the pleasure of his leather hand
But I want to know, when I feel it, will I feel it right?
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Gay initiation still takes time, evidently, and requires expert guidance. (My thanks to Annamarie Jagose for bringing this song to my attention.)


Identities


14. For a similar argument along feminist lines, see Teresa de Lauretis, “The Essence of the Triangle or, Taking the Risk of Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S., and Britain,” *differences*, 1.2 (Summer 1989), 3-37.