

SYMPOTIC LOVE?: CLASSICAL RECEPTION IN *CALL ME BY YOUR NAME*

by

Zachary Gianelle

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As members of the Master's Committee, we certify that we have read the thesis prepared by *Zachary Gianelle*, titled *Sympotic Love?: Classical Reception in Call Me by Your Name* and recommend that it be accepted as fulfilling the dissertation requirement for the Master's Degree.



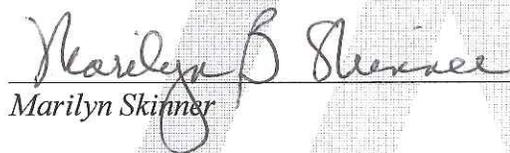
Arum Park

Date: 5-3-2019



Sarah McCallum

Date: MAY 3, 2019



Marilyn Skinner

Date: 5-3-2019

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Arum Park

Master's Thesis Committee Chair
Religious Studies and Classics

Date: 5-3-2019

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Abstract

Luca Guadagnino's popular 2017 film *Call Me by Your Name* and André Aciman's 2007 novel on which the film is based capture the story of a homoerotic summer romance in Italy between a Classics doctoral student of twenty-four and a seventeen-year-old adolescent. Both media present the story of this romance amid a host of classical tropes and allusions, but they each do so in different ways. While the novel engages with the classics in a thoughtful and interpretive way, the film exploits the controversial nature of the age-gap between the two protagonists, Elio (seventeen) and Oliver (twenty-four), alluding to the ancient institution of pederasty as its aesthetic defense. This is especially evident in Guadagnino's and Aciman's distinct treatments of Aciman's "San Clemente Syndrome," an episode in the book with sustained and pointed allusions to Plato's *Symposium*.

Introduction

Luca Guadagnino's 2017 film *Call Me by Your Name* has received, for the most part, glowing reviews. A New York Times reviewer said of Guadagnino's films, "what's most striking about these movies is their extraordinary palpable quality. In Mr. Guadagnino's work, passion and drama are expressed in words, deeds and surging music but also in the vibrant, visceral textures that envelop his characters — the cool marble, succulent fruit, shadow and light, sheens of sweat" (Durgis 2017). The film is based on a novel by André Aciman that shares much of the film's sensuousness and the 2007 book has enjoyed much more popular attention since the production of the film. The book and the film both achieve this level of luxuriousness and sensuality not only through descriptive *emotional* words and images, but also through their engagement with such elite cultural institutions as classical music, world literature, and ancient Greek and Roman culture. I want to focus primarily on the last of these aspects of the film and the novel, as these encounters with Graeco-Roman antiquity in the film work to aestheticize the sexual disparity of Athenian pederasty, which seems to be the sexual model superimposed on Elio and Oliver's relationship.

The topic of the film and the novel is a relationship between an adult man and an adolescent boy, which resembles the ancient Greek institution of pederasty in many ways. While the film has been received well by many reviewers, others have responded negatively to it, citing its exaggeration of the age difference between the characters and the potential for sexual exploitation in this relationship. Karamo Brown, a licensed psychotherapist and a character on the popular LGBTQ+ show, *Queer Eye*, said of the film:

I've worked with many survivors of sexual assault, especially in the LGBTQ community, which oftentimes goes unreported. And so the minute I saw that

movie, I thought, ‘Here we are glorifying this sort of relationship,’ ... I know we’re calling him a college student, but it looks like a grown man having sex with a little boy. (Brown 2018)

Cheyenne Montgomery, an author herself and a victim of sexual abuse at the hands of a teacher, had this to say about the age difference:

[Oliver] keeps asking Elio to tell him what he's thinking about. And it reminded me of my own experience, because it was word for word what my abuser said to me over and over again. The child just developmentally isn't in a position to really know what they wanna do, and what they wanna tell that adult. It's very confusing for a child. (Montgomery 2018)

These reactions to the film are disturbing to read, but they highlight its potential to be perceived as exploitative. The film glorifies a relationship which it seems intentionally to have made more problematic than the original story by extending the age difference between the characters; it also calls to mind abusive scenarios that are harmful to people who have been sexually victimized.

Reviewers who have criticized the film have tended not to level the same criticism at Aciman’s novel, on which it is based, even though the novel presents a sexual relationship between a twenty-four-year-old Oliver and a seventeen-year-old Elio. One reviewer defends the novel:

Call Me by Your Name, the book, then, is very much the story of a 17-year-old teenager learning to navigate and act on his desire. Aciman, the author, is interested in this rich and tumultuous journey, rather than necessarily endorsing sex across morally charged aged differences. Oliver remains mostly opaque: Though we learn he stayed away from Elio in the early days of summer to avoid

the coupling, their perspectives are never given equal footing. That, to me, is essential: *Call Me by Your Name* is really all about Elio's experience. Few readers who were ever 17, particularly (gay) male readers, will not recognize some of themselves in him. He's an older teenager messily discovering his sexuality. It's misguided to deny that such a basically human process should be represented in a work of art, even if the outcomes of that process make us uncomfortable.

(Bloomer 2017)

Indeed, Elio's perspective does make all the difference in Aciman's novel, because we are always aware of Elio's willingness or unwillingness to express and receive expressions of sexual desire with Oliver, and it is clear throughout that Elio consents to all sexual encounters that he has with Oliver.

While disparities in the receptions of the film and the novel tend to be centered on the dynamics of Elio and Oliver's relationship, little has been said about the different ways in which the film and the novel engage with ancient Greek and Roman culture and literature and utilize classics to assist or disassemble the exploitative potential of their relationship. This is an especially important matter considering the power that the film commands by its appeals to the authority of classics. Indeed, controversies have recently arisen within the academic field of classics concerning the appropriation of classical sexual mores for the particular purpose of defending modern asymmetrical and exploitative sexual relationships. Rebecca Kennedy, in a recent blog post, has drawn attention to this use of classics in the academic field, urging classicists to be skeptical of personally-driven misrepresentations of our ancient evidence (Kennedy 2018). We should apply this same skepticism to the film's use of classics. It represents Elio and Oliver's modern relationship as one analogous with Athenian pederasty with the result

that the inherent asymmetry of that ancient institution is aestheticized and even eroticized in the film.

Through a close examination of the film and the novel, I will elucidate Aciman's and Guadagnino's distinctive uses of the classics and compare them. I will show that Aciman tends to use particular allusions to Greek and Roman literature to destabilize gender and gendered sexual positions in gay relationships, while Guadagnino tends to use classics to glorify the disparity of Elio and Oliver's ages. Whereas Aciman's novel reflects a conscious and critical engagement with his classical source material, Guadagnino follows a tradition of idealizing ancient Greek pederasty despite its potential for exploitation. I will examine first the Uranian tradition of idealizing man-boy love in ancient Greece, in which Guadagnino's film engages, and then the film's and the novel's distinct treatments of classical works, especially Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and Plato's *Symposium*. As Aciman alludes heavily to the *Symposium* in his most symbolically dense section of the novel, "The San Clemente Syndrome," I have dedicated a full chapter to his use of Plato's dialogue.

Active and Passive Roles

In this paper I will be discussing Aciman's and Guadagnino's representations of active and passive sexual roles played by Oliver and Elio. The active and passive roles in a homosexual relationship today are often marked by a gendered conception of the sex acts of penetrating (masculine) and being penetrated (feminine), which gay men refer to as "topping" and "bottoming" respectively. In Greek pederastic relationships, these roles were strongly polarized into masculine and feminine categories based on the age difference between the *erastes* and *eromenos*. The *eromenos* (beloved) was the younger, passive partner in homoerotic sexual

relationships, and the *erastes* (lover) was the older, active partner. Of course, “topping” and “bottoming” are not completely analogous with the roles of *erastes* and *eromenos* in an elite pederastic relationship for a number of reasons, including the cultural assumption that the *eromenos* should not take any pleasure in intercourse with his *erastes* (Dover 1989: 52).

Nevertheless, Guadagnino’s and Aciman’s representations of Elio and Oliver’s relationship recall the structure of a pederastic relationship. Thus Guadagnino and Aciman both evoke the polarization of ancient Greek active and passive roles. We will see, however, that Aciman and Guadagnino represent these roles differently. While Aciman plays with the active and passive roles that Elio and Oliver adopt, Guadagnino often maintains the roles typically ascribed to the older and younger lovers within ancient pederastic relationships.

Chapter I: Pederastic Traditions

In an article concerning the ethics of Guadagnino's representation of a relationship between an older man (in his thirties, by his appearance) and a seventeen-year-old boy, Emily Rutherford pointed out the film's problematic engagement with "Uranian" aestheticizing of Greek pederasty (Rutherford 2018). The Uranians were an ill-defined and unofficial group of English and American poets in the late nineteenth century who wrote about the love of young boys and corresponded with one another about the themes of their poetry. Their name comes from Plato's description of Aphrodite *Ourania* as the intellectually driven love an ancient Athenian *erastes* felt toward his *eromenos*. Indeed, the Uranians often used their writings to admire the beauty of Greek youths particularly, and, in some cases, their ideas led to their own exploitation of young boys. Rutherford suggests that Guadagnino's film is engaging in the Uranians' exploitative tradition of writing erotic poetry for and about young boys. Yet, while Rutherford has drawn our attention to this apparent and problematic connection between Guadagnino's film and the Uranians, a closer look at these works yields many seemingly pointed references not only to Uranian poems and themes, but to the poetics of the very institution of Athenian pederasty, which they often cited in defense of their desire of boys. In this chapter I will offer a thorough examination of Guadagnino's engagement with Uranian literature and themes in order to establish the exploitative tradition in which the film has been situated. Guadagnino's production seems to revel in the sexual asymmetries pervasive in the Uranians' descriptions of ideal homosexual relationships, in contrast with Aciman's novel, which interrogates those asymmetries and our assumptions about them.

Who Were the Uranians?

Around 1888, primarily at Oxford and in London, a number of homosexual men began to develop a social and literary network centered around their interests in love between men and boys. They were not in any way an official group that gathered to discuss politics and poetry, but they formed a network of authors who shared similar interests. They would circulate their writings in small numbers, and they collaborated on coding homosexuality and/or boy-love into their poetry. Many of these men identified themselves as Uranians.

The term *ouranios* in the *Symposium*, whence Uranian comes, characterizes a kind of love that is distinguished for its exclusively male objects. In the *Symposium*, the speaker Pausanias describes two distinct versions of Aphrodite, Aphrodite *Ourania* (heavenly love) as distinguished from Aphrodite *Pandemos* (common love) (Pl. *Symp.* 180d–e)¹, corresponding to two different mythical origins of Aphrodite. Aphrodite *Ourania* is born from the sea foam after the genitals of Uranus were thrown into it, whereas Aphrodite *Pandemos* was born from Zeus and Dione. Pausanias thus distinguishes *Ourania* from *Pandemos*: “ὁ δὲ τῆς Οὐρανίας πρῶτον μὲν οὐ μετεχούσης θήλεος ἀλλ’ ἄρρενος μόνον—καὶ ἔστιν οὗτος ὁ τῶν παίδων ἔρωσ—ἔπειτα πρεσβυτέρας, ὕβρεως ἀμοίρου (but the other love is born of [Aphrodite] *Ourania*, who first of all has no part in the feminine but only the masculine—and this is the love of boys—and, second of all, is older, and she takes no part in hubris, 181c).² His distinction favors Aphrodite *Ourania* because she only has concern for what is masculine, because she is the older of the two Aphrodites, and because she takes no part in lawless violence or contempt. He states that the love that comes from Aphrodite *Ourania* is specifically the love of boys.

¹ All excerpts from Plato’s *Symposium* are taken from Dover 1980.

² Here, the word *hubris* bears the specific sense of “violating a boy’s autonomy.” Pausanias is saying that love motivated by Aphrodite *Ourania* will not compel a lover to rape a boy beloved.

These authors called themselves Uranians because they, like Pausanias, idealized love between men and boys. In the introduction to *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, John Addington Symonds praises ancient Greek sensibilities regarding sex:

[Greek homosexuality's] importance has hitherto been underrated by medical and legal writers on the subject, who do not seem to be aware that here alone in history have we the example of a great and highly-developed race not only tolerating homosexual passions, but deeming them of spiritual value, and attempting to utilise them for the benefit of society... What the Greeks called pederastia, or boy-love, was a phenomenon of one of the most brilliant periods of human culture, in one of the most highly organised and nobly active nations. It is the feature by which Greek social life is most sharply distinguished from that of any other people approaching the Hellenes in moral or mental distinction.

(Symonds 1908: 1)

It is easy to see here the extent to which Symonds idealized the Greeks and their ideas and institutions surrounding sex. As an outspoken defender of homosexuality, Symonds was able to come into contact with early Uranian authors with whom he wanted to share his ideas, and he became an important influence upon the Uranian movement (Smith 1970: 12). D. H. Mader identifies a broad range of Uranian classical receptions from translations of Greek and Roman texts, which contained homoerotic themes and characters that many translators downplayed in poems of their own composition that utilized those themes and characters (Mader 2005: 384–390).

While Symonds paved the way for homosexual men to communicate with one another and to create something of an early gay community, his praise of Greek pederasty is disturbing to

modern American sensibilities. We recognize today that disparity in age or maturity in a sexual relationship can introduce an asymmetry of power that can easily become coercive and exploitative. Nevertheless, Guadagnino's film follows this Uranian tradition of idealizing Greek pederasty in his representation of Elio and Oliver's relationship. Indeed, the echoes of the Uranians and of Greek pederastic poetics in the film further eroticize the wide age gap between Elio and Oliver, one wider than Aciman represents it in the book.

Bronze Boy

The film includes a scene that does not occur in the book, namely a reference to a poem by the American Uranian author, George Edward Woodberry, titled "Winged Eros of Tunis, recovered from the sea near Madia in 1904." Woodberry finishes the poem with these lines:

[Beautiful bronze boy...]

Thy loveliness disdained

A Rude and barbarian fate;

No Christian touch profaned

Thy form inviolate;

But plunged in ocean-peace

The blue waves did thee cover;

A score of centuries

Thou hadst the sea for a lover.

Late thence emerging now

Into the gray light wan,

Thou bringest the youthful brow

The world's dawn rests upon.

Strange is the sight, forlorn

The heart with the sense thereof,

Beautiful boy, reborn

Of the waves for our worship and love. (Woodberry 1914: 29–30)

As the title suggests, the “beautiful bronze boy” is a Greek bronze statue of Eros that has been recovered from the sea. That the Eros is “reborn/of the waves” is reminiscent of Hesiod’s description of the birth of Aphrodite (Hes. *Theog.* 188–193). This particular version of the myth of Aphrodite’s birth, as we have seen, is featured in the *Symposium*. The extraction of this Eros statue is symbolic of the Uranians’ project to recover expressions of same-sex love from literature muted and censored by a Christian culture averse to it. Woodberry’s poem outlines the opposition between Christian ideology and Hellenistic sensibility and imagines a revival of the Hellenistic “desire for beauty” to be our moral and intellectual guide (Mader 2005: 393).

Guadagnino draws on this poem in the scene where Elio’s father discovers in a lake a similar bronze boy that is supposed to be a “Praxiteles original” (*Call Me by Your Name* 2017: 35:30). Elio and Oliver come to shore with Elio’s father and find the arm of a bronze statue on the ground. Oliver picks up the arm to examine it, and at Elio’s prompting, he extends the bronze arm to Elio in the gesture of a handshake. The next scene depicts the extraction of the rest of the statue’s body from the water while Elio’s father describes what the statue is and how it came to be at the bottom of the lake. By his description, a ship sank and left the bronze at the bottom of the lake. The ship was on its way to Isola del Garda in 1827 to deliver the statue as a gift from Count Lechi to his lover, contralto Adelaide Malanotte. This statue is one of four Praxiteles originals, two others of which were discovered by the emperor Hadrian in Tivoli but melted

down by a Farnese pope and recommissioned into a “particularly voluptuous Venus” (*Call Me by Your Name* 2017: 35:35). This statue is almost wholly intact, and even has its genitals still attached, despite the Christian censorship that mutilated the other two statues. When the bronze is brought to the beach, Oliver kneels beside it and runs his finger along its lips with awe.

The statue in the film marks, through later thematic references to this scene, the transposition of Elio’s body into that of the classical statue, which is highly eroticized by both its historical significance and the male characters admiring it. Oliver’s tracing of the statue’s lips is echoed in later scenes of intense intimacy between Oliver and Elio. Just before they kiss for the first time in the story, Oliver reaches over to Elio’s lips and begins to sensually trace them with his finger, which Elio touches with the tip of his tongue. When the two feel anxious after their first night sleeping together, Elio follows Oliver into town to confirm his feelings for Oliver, and he does this, in part, by mimicking the gesture again, rubbing his fingers against Oliver’s, then running his own fingers around his own lips. Leading up to the scene where they have sex for the first time, Elio writes Oliver a note asking him to meet. Elio has evidently been avoiding Oliver since their breakfast with the family that morning, and Elio discovers Oliver’s answer while Oliver is looking through pictures of “sensual” bronze statues with Elio’s father. These statues are explicitly likened to the one found in the lake, as Elio’s father comments that the statues in the slide show were likely “sculpted under the influence of Praxiteles,” evidently the sculptor of the bronze from the lake. Elio’s father also says that the statues have an “ageless ambiguity, as if they’re daring you to desire them” (*Call Me by Your Name* 2017: 1:12:30). It is clear from Oliver’s worried-looking reaction to this comment that he is thinking of the affirmative response he has left for Elio, which confirms that the two of them will meet at midnight. The late hour of their meeting and their apparent, mutual understanding of what Oliver meant by “see you at

midnight” indicate that sex with Elio is most likely on Oliver’s mind as Elio’s father praises the beauty of the Greek bronzes.

The transposition of Elio’s body onto a statue, one that is the subject of Uranian poetry, is an aesthetic choice which we ought to consider carefully. That Elio’s body is assimilated to the body of an inanimate, sexualized object reflects human objectification in exploitative sexual relationships. Our modern American sensibilities about sex demand mutual consent from all participants, and we recognize that the capacity to consent is problematized by wide gaps in age and in physical and emotional maturity. While Aciman works in the novel to confute and/or play with our expected structures of sexual power, as I will discuss in the next chapter, Guadagnino seems to use these asymmetrical structures without questioning their ethics. Indeed, Guadagnino’s film seems, by contrast, to relish these power disparities. He seems to accept this difference of power as a source of eroticism, as he offers no interrogation of it or our cultural perception of it.

Italy

The rustic Italian setting of both the film and the novel evokes a tradition of Victorian writing (including the writings of Uranians) that made Sicily out to be a new Greece, and therefore a physical locus to realize the homosexual aspects of ancient Greek culture that so fascinated them. Stefania Arcara, in an essay on John Symonds’ and Oscar Wilde’s writings about Sicily, says,

For homosexual literati, Sicily was a space for Hellenic transgressions in more than one sense: as a favourite tourist destination for the actualisation of illicit desires, and as a strategic literary locus from which to invoke the cultural legitimisation of the ancient ‘Greek love’ tradition. (Arcara 2012: 136)

She goes on to describe poems like Theodore Wratislaw's "To a Sicilian Boy," and Alfred Douglas' "A Sicilian Love Song," both of which describe erotic encounters with boys from within this Hellenized setting. She also includes a very evocative picture taken of two Sicilian boys dressed in Greek garb, one of whom wears only a laurel wreath on his head with a cloth to cover his genitals (Fig. 1). She suggests that photography like this may have encouraged Uranian writers to seek the eroticism of Sicily. This is, of course, an exploitative, imperialistic, and pornographic way of looking at a foreign country, and it taints any relationship these men might have had with the young inhabitants there. The Uranians reified the idealized landscapes of Theocritus' poetry into the actual landscapes of Italy, thereby also objectifying the inhabitants of that landscape (Jenkyns 1980: 290).

Guadagnino brings his audience to observe not only the idyllic Italian scenery, but also Elio's blooming sexuality within this eroticized landscape. While the book is written from Elio's perspective, giving the power of the narrative to Elio, whose home is in Italy, the narrative of the film, produced internationally, can easily be viewed from the perspective of the American outsider. Indeed, Oliver channels the erotic gaze of the audience directed at Elio just as the cinematic male figure has historically borne the audience's gaze directed at cinematic women. Laura Mulvey describes this typical function of identifiable male characters as a guide to the spectators' gaze:

The man controls the film fantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator, transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extra-diegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. This is made possible through the processes set in motion by

structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. (Mulvey 1999: 63–64)

Oliver, who is the object of Elio's gaze in the book, becomes the gazer in the film. This occurs especially in scenes that are focalized through Oliver, such as when Oliver approaches Elio, who has fallen asleep after climaxing into a peach, in order to perform fellatio on him. Through the film's narrative focalization via Oliver, Elio becomes the eroticized "other." He becomes a beautiful body that bears all of the sensual meaning of the Italian countryside as much as the peach itself does. Indeed, the film and the novel both symbolically assimilate Elio and the fruits of Elio's parents' estate. When Oliver etymologizes the word "apricot," he concludes that it is related to the Latin word *praecocere*, from which English derives the adjective "precocious," a defining characteristic of Elio himself. The film often features Oliver thirstily downing a glass of apricot juice, symbolizing his appetite for Elio. Elio disturbingly remarks in the novel, when he has finished with the peach, "the bruised and damaged peach, like a rape victim, lay on its side on my desk, shamed, loyal, aching, and confused, struggling not to spill what I'd left inside. It reminded me that I had probably looked no different on his bed last night after he'd come inside me the first time" (Aciman 2007: 147). In this scene of the book, Elio is desirous of both enacting and receiving sexual violence. Though this scene is uncomfortable for its direct evocation of rape imagery, we have no reason to doubt Elio's willingness to have sex with Oliver in the book, because we are with Elio for the entire narrative. By altering the focalization of this scene, however, Guadagnino obscures Elio's perspective. He becomes both an object of Oliver's and the audience's gaze, and an object of American fantasies about Italy, its landscapes, and its inhabitants.

Pederastic Rhetoric

At the end of the film, Elio's father lectures his son about the importance of savoring his youth.

This scene is taken almost precisely from a corresponding speech in the book. His speech reflects a type of rhetoric often used to persuade *eromenoi* in ancient Greek and Latin literature:

You had a beautiful friendship, maybe more than a friendship, and I envy you. In my place, most parents would hope the whole thing goes away, and pray their sons land on their feet, but I am not such a parent. We rip out so much of ourselves to be cured of things faster than we go bankrupt by the time we're 30, and have less to offer each time we start with someone new, but to make yourself feel nothing, so as not to feel anything... what a waste... I'll say one more thing. I may have come close, but I never had what you two have. Something always held me back, or stood in the way... Our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once, and before you know it, your heart's worn out, and as for your body, there comes a time when nobody looks at it, much less wants to come near it. (*Call Me by Your Name*: 1:57:00)

When he says, "our hearts and our bodies are given to us only once, and before you know it, your heart's worn out, and as for your body, there comes a time when nobody looks at it, much less wants to come near it," he is evoking a typical address to youths in a pederastic context that is meant to encourage them to give in to their lovers. This type of address appealed to the young man's fleeting youth, often focusing on the boy's growth of hair on his face and thighs as a sign that they have matured past the appropriate age of being an *eromenos*. Meleager marks the beginning of his scorn for his beloved with his beloved's new-grown facial hair (*Anth. Pal.* 12.33

= 90 G-P).³ Alcaeus exhorts his Nicander to keep the hair on his leg from spreading to his buttocks and to be aware that the days of his youth are ἀμετάκλητος (“irrevocable”) (*Anth. Pal.* 12.30 = 8 G-P). The Roman poet Horace, influenced by Hellenistic poets like Meleager and Alcaeus, writes just such an address to Ligurinus in *Odes* 4.10, which I will discuss in further detail.

It is important to note that the film is not representing Elio’s father in this scene as a pederastic voyeur in his son’s life. Rather he is a reflection of Elio himself. Indeed, the fact that Elio’s father is a kind of aged reflection of himself is intimately connected with Aciman’s theme of memory, as the novel is a kind of memoir from Elio’s perspective. Nevertheless, the extent to which this exhortation is advantageous to the older lover is somewhat disturbing, and we should consider why these words are put into the mouth of the boy-beloved. Elio’s father is situated in the film to convince his own young reflection, his son, to make the most of his youth while he still can. As Elio enters the room where he sits with his father to talk, the camera shows us Elio’s father seated before a mirror in which we see Elio himself. This is the same mirror that is arranged behind Oliver when Elio and Oliver first meet, the significance of which I will discuss at greater length in the next chapter. The mirror has therefore already been established in the film as a symbol of interpersonal connection and reflection between Elio and Oliver, and just as it juxtaposes Elio and Oliver at their first meeting, so too does it juxtapose Elio and his father in this scene. Elio’s father’s experiences, as much as he elucidates them in this scene, are like Elio’s, though they lacked the life and passion of Elio’s experiences with Oliver. Now that Oliver is gone, Elio’s partner in the reflection is not the man he loves. He now sees his balding, hirsute father, who remarks regretfully that youth will inevitably pass.

³ All excerpts from *Anthologica Palatina* are taken from Gow and Page 1965.

This scene is strikingly similar to Horace's *Odes* 4.10, in which the speaker imagines a time when his beloved will regret the departure of his youth by which he might have satiated a new-found appetite for sex with his older lover. Horace writes:

O crudelis adhuc et Veneris muneribus potens,
 insperata tuae cum veniet pluma superbiae
 et quae nunc umeris involitant deciderint comae,
 nunc et qui color est puniceae flore prior rosae,
 mutatus, Ligurine, in faciem verterit hispidam,
 dices "heu," quotiens te speculo videris alterum,
 "quae mens est hodie, cur eadem non puero fuit,
 vel cur his animis incolumes non redeunt genae?"

O you who are still cruel and still potent with the gifts of Venus, when unexpected fluff will come to your haughtiness, and when what hairs now float about your shoulders shall have fallen off, and when your complexion which now surpasses the flower of the crimson rose has changed, Ligurinus, and turned into a bristly face, you will say "Alas," as many times as you see a different you in the mirror, "why did I not have the same state of mind when I was a boy that I have today, or why don't my unimpaired cheeks return to this outlook?" (Hor. *Carm.* 4.10)⁴

Ligurinus is imagined here to be looking at a mirror after having matured past his days as a beautiful youth. He wishes that he had either had the foresight when he was younger not to disdain the gifts of his older lover or had his youth back now that he desires the speaker's love. His long hair is beginning to fall, and his face is beginning to grow hairs, which the speaker

⁴ All excerpts from Horace's *Odes* are taken from Thomas 2011.

describes as a kind of vengeance for his haughty rejection of the speaker's love. It is crucial to note in this scene that Horace is putting these thoughts in Ligurinus' mouth. Ligurinus' actual voice cannot be heard in this poem because Ligurinus' perspective is saturated with the lover's rhetoric. Ligurinus' silence in the poem and Elio's silence during his father's lecture demonstrate an essential problem with the man-boy love underlying these appeals: the voice of the boy is unrepresented or silenced.

Elio is, nevertheless, still cast exclusively as the *eromenos* in this scene, and the mirror that symbolizes Elio and Oliver's similarities fails as a symbol of sexual symmetry between the lovers. We need to be cautious of this pederastic appeal to Elio's youth, which invites and encourages Elio to invest himself in the asymmetry of a pederastic relationship. The echoes of unequal Uranian friendships and the pederastic traditions in which those friendships are idealized are presented in the film without any criticism of their ethics. Though the novel presents this scene in almost exactly the same way, Elio narrates it, and we understand his father's words from Elio's perspective. Timothee Chalamet's expression in the film is frozen and contemplative, but it is entirely unclear what he is thinking as his father romanticizes Elio's youth.

Conclusion

Elio's young Italian body is transformed both into a Greek statue and into a peach imbued with symbolism. His youth is idealized by patronizing adults, who explicitly eroticize him. These instances and their confluence with both classical pederastic writings and the classicizing writings of the Uranians should be a red flag for a modern audience, especially considering the extent to which Uranian authors were involved in scandalous relationships with their students. The film *Call Me by Your Name* evokes the writings of the Uranians in many ways without

challenging or criticizing the problematic sexual mores inscribed in their fascination with ancient Greek expressions of same-sex desire, which tended to be exclusively asymmetrical. Through the film's interest in Graeco-Roman antiquity and the sexual practices of those cultures, as well as through their direct engagement with the reception of Greek homoeroticism by the Uranians, the film *Call Me by Your Name* invests itself in a cultural and literary tradition that valorizes and romanticizes sexually asymmetrical relationships, which are patronizing at best, and objectifying or exploitative at their worst.

Chapter II: Classical Reception in *Call Me by Your Name*

Aciman's novel is filled with references to famous classical works that have notably homoerotic characteristics. Apart from his explicit use of Plato's *Symposium*, which I shall discuss in further detail in the following chapter, Aciman alludes to authors and stories that have traditionally attracted the attention of scholars of ancient sexuality, gender, and homosexuality. In this chapter, I will conduct a thorough analysis of the novel and its use of these authors and narratives in order to demonstrate how Aciman's interest in ambiguity results in various queer readings of the ancient texts from which he draws. I will also discuss the ways in which the film represents these moments of classical reception, and how the film emphasizes or alters Aciman's use of classics. The author's broad use of these classical authors and stories both attests to his conscious use of classics and also often works to support his representation of the *Symposium* in his "San Clemente Syndrome" chapter.

Aciman has noted in a "Goldman Sachs Talks" interview that an important issue for his narrator Elio is his inability to form one wholly consistent identity from all the different aspects of his life that define him. Aciman describes Elio's project to transcribe a quartet ("The Last Seven Words of Christ") for piano:

I assume that this is a project that we all have in our lives. We try to take all these disparate parts of our identity and conflate it into one thing, only to find that there are at least four of them that will never unite, and, as I like to say, never even speak to each other, and that's what I call "The San Clemente Syndrome."

(Goldman Sachs Talks 2018: 3:20)

Aciman has intended for his narrator to resist a single interpretation because Elio is himself meant to reflect the condition of people to be dynamic and difficult to categorize. It is not surprising, then, that his representations of Elio's relationship with Oliver through references to ancient Greek and Roman literature should perform, by themselves, a queer reading of those traditional categories of gender and sexual power dynamics. Early in the novel, Aciman alludes to Homer and Sappho, establishing his familiarity with ancient love poetry. He most often alludes to the works of Ovid, especially the *Metamorphoses*, throughout the novel. Aciman's father used to read him the *Metamorphoses*, and his love of this text is apparent in his use of it in his novel (Aciman 2019). I will first examine his brief allusions to Homer and Sappho, then I will consider his more sustained use of Ovid.

Sappho

In a novel as sensual, sensitive, and homoerotic as *Call Me by Your Name*, it is unsurprising that we should find echoes of Sappho. In my personal interview with Aciman, he stated that he had not actually been thinking of Sappho when he wrote this section, but the similarities of this passage and Sappho fragment 31 are striking (Aciman 2019). While we cannot determine from these echoes that Aciman is consciously weaving Sappho into his narrative in order to point to her as a kind of queer historical figure, it is clear that Aciman is familiar with Sappho or receptions of Sappho. Thus Elio describes his early reaction to Oliver:

[...]fire tore through my guts—because 'fire' was the first and easiest word that came to me later that same evening when I tried to make sense of it in my diary[...] Not a fire of passion, not a ravaging fire, but something paralyzing, like the fire of cluster bombs that suck up the oxygen around them and leave you

panting because you've been kicked in the gut and a vacuum has ripped up every living lung tissue and dried your mouth, and you hope nobody speaks, because you can't talk, and you pray no one asks you to move, because your heart is clogged and beats so fast it would sooner spit out shards of glass than let anything else flow through its narrowed chambers. (Aciman 2007: 14)

This characterization of his physical response to Oliver reflects many of Sappho's love symptoms. Elio's mouth becomes dry and he cannot speak. Sappho writes “κάμ μὲν γλῶσσα ἔαγε” (but my tongue breaks entirely) and “ὥς γὰρ εἰσίδω βροχέως σε, φώνας | οὐδὲν ἔτ' ἵκει.” (for when I look briefly at you, still nothing of a voice comes, *Sapph.* 31.7–8).⁵ Love affects Elio's actual tongue, just as it affects the tongue of the speaker in Sappho's poem. Neither the Sapphic speaker nor Elio are able to speak when they see their beloveds. Elio says that his heart “beats so fast it would sooner spit out shards of glass than let anything else flow through its narrowed chambers,” which recalls Sappho's “τό μ' ἦ μάν | καρδίαν ἐν στήθεσιν ἐπτόησεν” (truly it makes my heart tremble in my breast, 31.5–6). Both are expressing the physical feeling of a distressed heart in the presence of their beloveds. Most strikingly, Elio characterizes these feelings as stemming from a “fire,” which seems to him to be the only way to describe the feeling. The fire “tears through [Elio's] guts.” This fire recalls Sappho's use of fire to express feelings of love, saying, “and at once a thin fire runs under my skin” (λέπτον | δ' αὐτικά χρῶ πῦρ ὑπαδερόμηκεν, 31.9–10). Both Elio and Sappho identify this feeling as an internal fire that flows through them, “running under the skin” for Sappho, and “tearing through the guts” for Elio.

⁵ All excerpts from Sappho are taken from Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* 1967.

Through Elio's espousal of Sappho's affective language, which is marked as effeminate, his performance of gender subverts our gender expectations. That Elio should feel physical pain caused by love is indicative of vulnerability and passivity, qualities generally abhorrent to ancient Greek men. Eva Stehle succinctly sums up this dichotomy, saying that Greek gender ideology "represents the male body as solid, the female as porous and therefore more prone to possession, madness, desire, pollution" (Stehle 2009: 58). Elio describes his physical susceptibility to Oliver in a way that characterizes him as effeminate by Greek male standards. Aciman highlights the fluidity and flexibility of Elio's gender through such effeminizing language. This Sapphic allusion thus anticipates nicely Aciman's later classical allusions that also function to confound normative gender roles in the lovers' relationship.

Homer

Early in the novel, Elio compares his relationship with Oliver with the friendship of Glaucus and Diomedes, presented in a minor episode in *Iliad* 6. Elio says, "I was Glaucus and he was Diomedes. In the name of some obscure cult among men, I was giving him my golden armor for his bronze. Fair exchange. Neither haggled, just as neither spoke of thrift or extravagance" (Aciman 2007: 30). In *Iliad* 6, Glaucus and Diomedes meet on the battlefield, and Diomedes asks who Glaucus is. He learns that Glaucus' father is a friend of his own father, and the two make a pact and exchange their armor. Diomedes gives Glaucus his bronze armor, worth nine oxen, while Glaucus gives Diomedes his golden armor, worth one hundred oxen. Glaucus gives up his armor supposedly because Zeus took away his wits (Hom. *Il.* 6.144–236).

Elio shows through this comparison both that he himself is aware of an asymmetry in his relationship with Oliver and that he accepts this asymmetry. Elio says that he, as Glaucus, gives

up something far more valuable than the thing he receives back from Oliver, here an avatar of Diomedes. In the context of the Homeric allusion, Elio seems to mean that he has far more affection for Oliver as a friend than Oliver does for Elio. However, the asymmetry in their relationship characterized by this comparison is not the exploitative power asymmetry omnipresent in Uranian poetry. Elio is attempting to explain his feelings for Oliver as a friendship at this point in the narrative, as he has not quite decided that his feelings are sexual. The disparity Elio perceives between Oliver's care for him and his care for Oliver will of course be overturned later in the novel, when Elio learns that Oliver has cared for Elio for much of the time they had spent together. Indeed, Vimini, a young girl who sometimes visits Oliver, Elio, and his family, thinks that Oliver likes Elio more than Elio likes Oliver (Aciman 2007: 91). Furthermore, the fact that he compares himself and Oliver to Glaucus and Diomedes is itself an allusion to the *Symposium*, in which Alcibiades compares himself and Socrates to this same Homeric pair (Pl. *Symp.* 219a). This sets up Aciman's thematic comparison of Elio and Oliver with Alcibiades and Socrates, which I will address in the following chapter.

Ovid's Echo

Outstanding among Aciman's references to classical literature is his persistent use of the myth of Echo and Narcissus, coming mostly in the form of subtle allusions to aspects of the myth. Given the novel's broader use of repetition, reflection, and interpersonal identification, Echo and Narcissus are aptly matched to Elio and Oliver. Indeed, Narcissus' love for his own reflection is suggested in the very title, "*Call Me by Your Name*," as will be discussed in greater detail below. Furthermore, the anagrammatic relationship of the names "Elio" and "Oliver" (**O-L-I-V-E-R**) emphasizes the interchangeable roles of the two central characters. The protagonists of *Call Me*

by *Your Name* take on the courting roles of each mythic character in turn. Elio evokes Echo in his transcription of classical music, and Oliver mimics Echo's restricted use of language, as she is not able to speak on her own, but can only repeat things that have been said to her. I shall first examine the ways in which the author uses the character of Echo, then of Narcissus.

Throughout the novel, Elio demonstrates that he is a precocious young man by his ability to transcribe the works of various composers and to blend them according to his own taste. Oliver often responds to Elio with a repetition of Elio's question or statement, then expresses his own attitude. In one scene, Elio plays a passage of Bach on his guitar, which draws Oliver's attention, and their interaction reflects Narcissus' dialogue with Echo. After some awkward, misunderstood eye contact, Oliver asks Elio to play the Bach again, and Aciman describes Elio's reaction: "But I thought you hated it. Hated it? Whatever gave you that idea? We argued back and forth, 'Just play it will you?' 'The same one?' 'The same one'" (Aciman 2007: 12). Aciman often writes summary dialogues between his characters that give us the gist of their conversation without including quotation marks. Clearly in the text itself, Oliver enacts Echo's restricted use of language, using repetition to re-contextualize or slightly alter the phrase being repeated. Ovid writes of Echo's condition: *tamen haec in fine loquendi | ingeminat voces auditaque verba reportat* ("Nevertheless, she repeats these words at the conclusion of his speech and gives back the expressions she has heard," Ov. *Met.* 366–367).⁶ Oliver's response "hated it?" turns Elio's statement into a question, just as Echo turns Narcissus' question into a statement: *dixerat "ecquis adest?" et "adest!" responderat Echo* ("He had said, 'Is anyone here?' and 'She is here!' Echo had responded," Ov. *Met.* 6.379). Elio notes Oliver's habit of speaking this way, saying, "I loved the way he repeated what I myself had just repeated. It made me think of a caress, or of a

⁶ All excerpts from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* are taken from Magnus 1892.

gesture, which happens to be totally accidental the first time but becomes intentional the second time and more so yet the third” (Aciman 2007: 27).

After Oliver has asked Elio to play Bach’s composition again, it is Elio’s turn to mirror Echo, and he does so by transcribing music. Elio twice responds to his request with an altered version of the tune: “I just played it the way Liszt would have played it had he jimmied around with it,” and again, “This is just how Busoni would have played it if he had altered Liszt’s version” (Aciman 2007: 12). Thinking back to Aciman’s own statements about the significance of Elio’s transcription project, this scene symbolizes Elio’s attempts to express himself with all the complexities of his identity that are impossible for him to say in any unified or concise way. Echo faces a similar challenge in expressing herself, as both of their attempts at self-expression are fragmented by their inability to speak for themselves, Echo because she literally cannot speak autonomously, and Elio because he is afraid to speak. Indeed, Elio later emphasizes his fear of speaking when he likens himself to a knight in a novella he is reading who cannot decide whether it is better “to speak or to die” in order to resolve his concealed love for a princess (Aciman 2007: 63). We later learn that the knight does decide to speak, but “fudges” and does not say everything that he wants to say (Aciman 2007: 68).

Apart from Elio’s hobby of transcribing music, he channels Echo often in the novel when he describes his contemplative repetitions of things Oliver says to him in his dreams or in actuality. He has a dream that Oliver says, “you’ll kill me if you stop,” which happens in his dreams on various other occasions, and Elio holds onto this phrase until the two of them finally consummate their love and Elio repeats the phrase aloud several times (Aciman 2007: 134). Similarly, when Oliver significantly tells him, “if not later, when?” (referring to Elio’s hesitation to have sex with Mariza, which he feels comfortable boasting about to his father and Oliver at

breakfast), Elio says that he “repeated his phrase as if it were a prophetic mantra meant to reflect how he lived his life and how I was attempting to live mine” (Aciman 2007: 51). These examples further highlight Aciman’s theme of repetition which underscores his more potent references to the myth of Echo and Narcissus.

Narcissus

The characteristics of Narcissus are also present in both of the characters, and this should come as no surprise considering the extent to which the myth of Narcissus has been a topic of interest in discussions of ancient homosexuality. Of course, the title of the book, “*Call Me by Your Name*,” and the appearance of this command in the book itself bring into sharp relief the allusions to Echo and Narcissus throughout. At the peak of Oliver and Elio’s first sexual encounter, Oliver tells Elio, “Call me by your name and I’ll call you by mine” (Aciman 2007: 134). The height of their emotional and physical connection is marked by their exchange and conformity of identity: their love is all about each seeing himself in the other.

After the two lovers have at last slept together, we learn that what each perceived as the other’s indifference and dislike had actually been signs of their affection all along. In fact, we learn that the signs they misunderstand are largely signs that each himself uses to convey affection, so that they are almost literally in love with their own reflections. This shared characteristic of Oliver and Elio is reminiscent of Narcissus’ words to his image:

spem mihi nescio quam vultu promittis amico,
cumque ego porrexisti tibi brachia, porrigis ultro:
cum risi, adrides; lacrimas quoque saepe notavi
me lacrimante tuas, nutu quoque signa remittis,

et quantum motu formosi suspicor oris,
 verba refers aures non pervenientia nostras.

You promise me some hope with your friendly face, and when I have reached my arms out to you, you have reached out reciprocally: when I have laughed, you have joined in laughter; and often I have marked your tears when I was crying, and you send back signs with a nod, and as much as I perceive from a movement of your beautiful lips, you give back words that do not come through to my ears.

(Ov. *Met.* 3.455–460)

Like Narcissus, each perceives the signs given by the other, but they cannot be sure exactly how to interpret those signs because they do not have any opportunity to talk about the significance of their gestures unless they find themselves in a private place. Narcissus notes that his reflection's gestures mirror his own, but Elio and Oliver do not seem to realize that their signs of love are almost exactly the same until they have the opportunity to speak about those signs. Nevertheless, in either case, it is the *words* that are missing: Narcissus needs his reflection to confirm with words his suspicion that the reflection loves him back, just as Elio and Oliver both need spoken consent from the other before pursuing their desire for each other.

In one particular passage, at a crucial point in the development of their sexual relationship, Elio likens one of these signs to the myth of Narcissus. Elio first confesses his attraction to Oliver when the two of them venture into town together and Elio shows him a few of his favorite sites in B. (Aciman's name for the town near Elio's parents' home). When they come to Elio's secret reading spot, not unlike Narcissus' sequestered pool, Elio describes a bout of tense eye contact between himself and Oliver:

He was waiting for me to say something. He was staring at me. This, I think, is the first time I dared myself to stare back at him. Usually, I'd cast a glance then look away—look away because I didn't want to swim in the lovely, clear pool of his eyes unless I'd been invited to—and I never waited long enough to know whether I was even wanted there; look away because I was too scared to stare anyone back; look away because I didn't want to give anything away; look away because I couldn't acknowledge how much he mattered... I stared back with the all-knowing, I-dare-you-to-kiss-me gaze of someone who both challenges and flees with one and the same gesture. (Aciman 2007: 78)

Elio refers to the myth of Narcissus, describing Oliver's gaze as "the lovely, clear pool of his eyes," evoking the beauty and treachery of the pool that captures Narcissus' gaze. For both Elio and Narcissus, it is important that their beloved extends them a clear invitation to proceed. Narcissus' reflection, because it is incapable of speaking, seems coy and secretive to Narcissus, just as Elio seems to Oliver, who watches him expectantly. Now Elio stares intently at Oliver, but is "fleeing" with the same gesture, playing both the role of the pursuer and the pursued lover. Narcissus, in the same way, conveys both signs of pursuing and being pursued with his gestures, as the reflection of his attempts to court his reflection look to him like gestures appropriate for one being courted.

"One with Your Lust"

Apart from Aciman's use of the myth of Echo and Narcissus, he frequently uses other passages of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* to articulate Elio's deep affection for Oliver. While there are likely to be more Ovidian influences in the novel than are marked by the author, I have chosen to discuss

only those which the author signals with thematic consistency or by a direct mention of Ovid. Two such instances where Ovid is directly mentioned include Elio's personal reflection on his first kiss with Oliver and the scene where Elio masturbates with a peach. The first mention is reminiscent of Ovid's representation of the myth of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis, and the second strongly evokes Apollo and Daphne.

Considering the key theme of the novel of interpersonal identification between two lovers, highlighted by its very title, it is not surprising that the story of Hermaphroditus should be a useful referent for the author. After Elio and Oliver share their first kiss, and Elio hungrily returns to Oliver's lips for a second, prolonged kiss, he fantasizes a request: "just take me and molt me and turn me inside out, till, like a character in Ovid, I become one with your lust, that's what I wanted"(Aciman 2007: 81). Though Aciman has not explicitly identified Hermaphroditus, Elio's words evoke the painful, fusing transformation of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus, which Ovid sets in a *locus amoenus*. Aciman's reference to this story occurs at the place to which the chapter title refers: the berm on which Monet did his painting. We can tell that it is a pleasant spot, with palm trees, olive trees, and marine pines, and a river nearby (Aciman 2007: 76). Indeed, Hermaphroditus and Salmacis become one through Salmacis' indefatigable lust for Hermaphroditus at just such a spot. Tempted by the cool water and believing himself to be alone, Hermaphroditus swims in the water where Salmacis finds him and holds him fast. She prays to the gods that they will never be separated: *Ita di iubeatis! et istum nulla dies a me nec me diducat ab isto* (May you thus command this, gods! And let no day separate him from me nor me from him!, Ov. *Met.* 4.371–372). Her prayer is answered. Ovid describes their physical union:

...nam mixta duorum

corpora iunguntur, faciesque inducitur illis

una, velut, siquis conducat cortice ramos,
 crescendo iungi pariterque adolescere cernit.
 sic ubi complexu coierunt membra tenaci,
 nec duo sunt et forma duplex, nec femina dici
 nec puer ut possit: neutrumque et utrumque videntur.

For the mixed bodies of the two are joined, and one shape is put on them (both), just as one discerns, if anyone should graft branches in a tree's bark, those branches are joined in growing, and mature as one. Thus when their limbs came together with her clutching embrace, neither are they two and double in form, nor so that it may be called woman or boy: they seem to be neither and both. (Ov.

Met. 4.373–379)

In this scene, Ovid makes the *locus amoenus*, as he does thematically throughout the *Metamorphoses*, a site of rape and violence (Bernstein 2011: 77). Aciman does not, however, evoke Ovid's violent intrusions on the *locus amoenus*. Rather, he describes Elio's imagined demand for this Ovidian metamorphosis while the scene itself remains the *locus amoenus* of the elegiac tradition: a place of nature, peace, and poetry. Elio's wish, nevertheless, evokes Ovid's description of the myth: just as Salmacis wishes to be joined to Hermaphroditus, so too does Elio ask that Oliver be fused with himself. Whether Salmacis' fusion with Hermaphroditus was consistent with her actual wish when she asked that they never be divided is not a question the text answers. However, Elio, as an avid reader, familiar with Ovid, appropriates this story to make explicit his own wish to have sex with Oliver.

This allusion to Hermaphroditus and Salmacis evokes, again, Aciman's interest in representing the fluidity of the boundaries of lover and beloved in the classical source he is

drawing from. The Ovidian allusions underscore Elio's double-role as pursuer and pursued. In making the prayer that they be united and in revealing his desire that they be joined, Elio takes on the role of Salmacis. Conversely, the role of Oliver's "lust" in Elio's wish suggests Oliver's own affiliation with Salmacis, as Hermaphroditus does not feel anything like lust for her. Just as Hermaphroditus' name calls to mind both the male and female sexes, so too do Elio and Oliver's feelings for one another reflect Hermaphroditus' passive and active sexual sides. Indeed, the result of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus' fusion marks a transcendence of sex, in that it both unifies and nullifies Hermaphroditus' sex. By becoming either (*utrum*), Hermaphroditus simultaneously becomes neither (*neutrum*) (Stone 2002: 179). Elio and Oliver become either and neither not only through their continuous mirroring of one another, but also through their performance of active and passive sexual roles that are inscribed with our culturally assumed dynamics of gender. Through his allusion to the myth of Hermaphroditus, Aciman subtly dismantles our expectation that Elio and Oliver should have a distinct sexual power dynamic as "top" or "bottom." Their gendered positions in their relationship subscribe to either and neither gender.

"The Peach Scene"

The other explicit mention of Ovid in the novel occurs when Elio masturbates with a peach. After a particularly vivid description of thoughts and feelings exciting him during the act, Elio reflects,

I scanned my mind for images from Ovid—wasn't there a character who had turned into a peach and, if there wasn't, couldn't I make one up on the spot, say, an ill-fated young man and young girl who in their peachy beauty had spurned an

envious deity who had turned them into a peach tree, and only now, after three thousand years, were being given what had been so unjustly taken away from them, as they murmured, *I'll die when you're done, and you mustn't be done, must never be done?* (Aciman 2007: 147)

The “image from Ovid” that Elio thinks up is a composite one: it does not correspond exactly with any particular metamorphosis in the poem, but has themes from many of them. Because he imagines that the two young people have become a tree after spurning a deity, we as readers are inclined to think of such metamorphoses as those of Daphne and Syrinx. Both Daphne and Syrinx are painted into Ovid’s landscape, Daphne as a laurel tree and Syrinx as the reeds, after they fled the advances of the lascivious gods Apollo and Pan respectively. The peach Elio uses has already been mapped onto the landscape Aciman describes. Elio’s parents grow peaches and apricots at their Italian home, and these, as I have mentioned in the previous chapter, are symbolic of Elio himself. Elio also sexualizes these transformed young people in much the same way that Ovid himself sexualizes Daphne. Indeed, Amy Richlin has noted that Daphne’s flight is a kind of written pornography: her body is bared as she runs and her fear enhances her beauty (Richlin 2014: 139). Becoming a tree, Daphne is made into a literal object of Apollo’s desire, which he caresses as a kind of consolation prize for the loss of Daphne’s body (Ov. *Met.* 1.556–558). Elio’s projection of his sexual fantasy onto the peach reverses Ovid’s practice of objectifying women (literally turning them into objects), as he invests the inanimate object with life and sexual desire, which allows Elio to access Ovid’s violent descriptions with his imagination.

Even in this scene where Elio casts himself as one of Ovid’s lecherous characters, he does not maintain the active role entirely. The last thing he says after his harsh description of the

peach as a “rape victim” is: “It reminded me that I had probably looked no different on his bed last night after he’d come inside me the first time” (Aciman 2007: 147). By projecting himself into the peach, Elio figures both as the sexual assailant of the peach and as the peach itself. After he has mirrored Ovid’s process of erotically describing the fear and flight of his victims, then petrifying that eroticism into a new, unmoving form, Elio also mirrors his sexual encounter with Oliver. While Elio and Oliver’s sex is explicitly consensual in the novel, Elio allows himself to play both the role of objectifier and objectified in his brief Ovidian fantasy.

Guadagnino’s Adaptation

Guadagnino’s adaptation highlights many of the book’s classical themes, but he often includes the classics to achieve a certain aesthetic for the film rather than to critically interrogate the classical source material. Opening with a photographic montage of ancient Greek bronze statuary, Guadagnino immediately highlights the theme of ancient Greek art in the film. The desk spread with these images is likely Elio’s father’s work area, as his father is conducting an archeological study of statuary, for which reason he has taken on Oliver as an intern. The pictured figures are mostly of young, athletic men, announcing the film’s aesthetic interest in these idealized bodies and hinting at their erotic significance within the film’s aesthetics. While these images and statues are emphasized throughout the film and are used to retain the novel’s upper-class characterization of Elio’s family, the book has virtually no interaction with the eroticism of ancient Greek statuary.

The director notably highlights Heraclitus in the film, and he does so in a way that also foregrounds Aciman’s thematic messages in the novel. Aciman describes Oliver as a doctoral student writing a thesis about the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus. Yet Aciman never makes

direct reference to Heraclitus' famous saying, "ποταμῷ γὰρ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐμβῆναι δις τῷ αὐτῷ" (you cannot step in the same river twice, fr. 91).⁷ The film, however, offers an interpretation of the saying that corresponds with Aciman's theme of multiple identities. While Elio silently reads Oliver's notes on Heraclitus, the narration of the words is heard in the voice of Oliver: "some things stay the same only by changing" (*Call Me by Your Name* 2017: 38:40). Indeed, Guadagnino seems to flesh out Aciman's purpose for including Heraclitus without whittling Aciman's novel or Guadagnino's film down to a small philosophical axiom. Aciman's characters have many different aspects of themselves, none of which are necessarily harmonious with one another. Change is therefore inevitable in any person. Oliver's notes on Heraclitus suggest that he reads this fragment to mean "the only surety one can find in the world is the surety that things inevitably change."

Guadagnino highlights especially Aciman's thematic use of the myth of Narcissus. When Elio and Oliver first meet in the film, Elio comes downstairs to find Oliver in his father's study, where a large mirror hangs. Oliver is standing right in front of the mirror when Elio first sees him, and he shakes Oliver's hand with the mirror directly behind Oliver. Guadagnino thus highlights Aciman's thematic allusions to Narcissus at Elio and Oliver's first encounter. The mirror reflects Elio and Oliver again while they are both in Elio's father's study discussing the origins of the word "apricot" (*Call Me by Your Name* 2017: 11:35). As Oliver speaks with Elio's father in the study, we see Elio reading in the corner through the mirror, exemplifying the very "precociousness" that symbolically assimilates him with the apricot.

Narcissus' story is most clearly marked in the scene where Elio brings Oliver to Monet's berm. Guadagnino takes the mythic association of this scene a bit farther than Aciman's book,

⁷ All excerpts from Heraclitus' *The Cosmic Fragments* are taken from Kirk 1954.

situating this spot around a cool, stagnant pond surrounded by trees. This revised landscape turns the berm more explicitly into Narcissus' secret pool, a *locus amoenus*, where he falls in love with his own reflection. Guadagnino has Elio and Oliver stand in the pool together as Oliver first begins to show some vulnerability around Elio. It is clear in this scene that there is an attraction more mutual than has yet been observed between them in the film, and this is orchestrated nicely by the director to emphasize the impact on Oliver and Elio's romantic friendship of the scene at the berm.

Guadagnino's representation of Narcissus' *locus amoenus* is, however, much more Ovidian than Aciman's, inasmuch as Guadagnino makes the *locus amoenus* as foreboding a place as Ovid does. Elio and Oliver ride their bikes along an Italian country road with music that grows increasingly tense as they come closer to their destination, the berm. The music cuts off abruptly when they first arrive. Despite the berm's shady trees and cool waters in the hot afternoon, the audience is made to feel tense and expectant. Ovid famously invites rape and violence to the *locus amoenus* in order to play with the elegiac trope of the *locus amoenus* as a place of natural peace and music (Bernstein 2011: 79). Aciman's representation of the berm has Elio contemplating an Ovidian *locus amoenus*, but it is only a thought in Elio's head: the peace of the *locus amoenus* remains intact in the novel. Guadagnino's expansion on the Ovidian themes in the novel revels in the potential for rape in this scene: Elio is alone in a hidden, wooded area with a man who looks to be in his thirties. In concert with the tense music leading up to this scene, the audience is made to feel this potential for rape.

Conclusion

While Aciman engages thoughtfully and critically with his ancient source material, Guadagnino tends to use classics in his film to aestheticize a relationship that we would otherwise find unacceptable. The novel takes episodes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that play with and confuse a gendered power dynamic determined by Elio and Oliver's difference in age in a way that constantly reassures us of Elio's willingness to be with Oliver. Guadagnino's film uses classics to disguise a relationship with a problematically exacerbated age difference. He plays up the aspects of Elio and Oliver's relationship that are ethically questionable with Ovidian allusion as his aesthetic defense. Guadagnino's beautifully shot, classically inspired film should give us as much pause as Ovid's artfully composed descriptions of rape. Beneath the artifice and allusion of the film lurks the idealization of an exploitative and unwelcome fascination with the adolescent male body.

Chapter III: Plato's *Symposium* and the San Clemente Syndrome

Now that we have examined the film's and the novel's engagement with classical texts and the Uranian reception of classical culture, I will turn to the novel's most sustained classical allusion: Plato's *Symposium*, which Aciman presents in his section, "The San Clemente Syndrome." This allusion marks Aciman's engagement with the Uranian tradition of validating homosexuality through the *Symposium*. John Addington Symonds, a foundational contributor to the writings of the Uranians, wrote of his experience reading the *Symposium*: "it was just as though the voice of my own soul spoke to me through Plato, as though in some antenatal experience I had lived the life of a philosophical Greek lover" (2016: 152). Though the problematic nature of such a comparison is more widely recognized by modern classicists, Symonds' affective response to Plato's valorization of same-sex erotic relationships marks the beginning of a tradition of reading the *Symposium* as a classical defense of homosexuality. Aciman's novel, however, has a unique relationship with this tradition. In his reception of the *Symposium*, Aciman conveys critical interpretations of the feelings of and the relationships between Plato's characters through an interrogation of the physical and emotional feelings of his own symbolic Platonic characters. His interpretations challenge the strict sexual power dynamics that the institution of Athenian pederasty imposed on those involved in such relationships. However, this same criticism of pederasty in the *Symposium* is not made in the film. Guadagnino deletes the San Clemente Syndrome, an episode in the novel that alludes directly to the *Symposium*, but the director does allude to the philosophical ascent of the lovers. The film thus interacts with the *Symposium* in the same problematic way that Symonds does: they both represent ancient pederasty as ideal and offer no criticism of the unbalanced power dynamics inherent in the institution of pederasty.

The San Clemente Syndrome

“The San Clemente Syndrome” features Elio and Oliver’s attendance at the author Alfredo’s dinner party, which recalls the dramatic scenario of Plato’s *Symposium*. Alfredo himself is meant to mirror Socrates, and this connection is made especially clear in the way certain characters speak about his bare feet. A guest at his poetry reading says of his feet, “A pauper’s feet. Walked barefoot all his life, and still buys shoes a size bigger, in case he grows before next Christmas when the family stocks up for the holidays!” (Aciman 2007: 179). As Socrates was known to walk around without shoes and to have the appearance of being poor, this description is meant to signal Alfredo’s likeness to Socrates (Aciman 2019). At the dinner party, Alfredo talks to his companions on the topic of love, inspired by the title of his latest publication, *Se l’amore*, “If this is love, then...” (Aciman 2007: 179). Later, Alfredo tells a story about an androgynous night clerk he met at a hotel in Thailand, who mirrors Diotima in her philosophical influence upon him. When Alfredo has finished his story about Thailand, a group of latecomers arrives drunk and encourages the group to keep drinking (Aciman 2007: 196–197). Aciman explained to me in our interview that this group is meant to recall the intrusion of Alcibiades into the drinking party at which Socrates is present (Aciman 2019).

Alfredo’s experience in Thailand recalls Socrates’ discussion with Diotima, as he learns an important lesson about love and sex from a hotel worker there. While claiming not to be an expert in love, he relates a story about how he came to have a new understanding of it through a foreigner wiser than himself. While Socrates learns from Diotima, also a foreigner, that love is the desire for good things, Alfredo learns a different lesson from the hotel worker of ambiguous gender. He/she teaches Alfredo that love is not singular or clear in its objects, but that one is capable of loving someone of either gender or of both genders at once. When the hotel worker

asks Alfredo whether he wants her as a man or as a woman, Alfredo tells his listeners that he thought, “I didn’t know what answer to give. I wanted to say, I want you as intermezzo. So I said, I want you as both, or as in between” (Aciman 2007: 196). Alfredo then says that the hotel worker “seemed taken aback” by this statement. Aciman has reversed the roles of the Diotima character (the hotel worker) and the Socrates character (Alfredo) by having Alfredo offer the “in-between” answer that Diotima teaches Socrates. In the *Symposium*, Diotima has to teach Socrates through an analogy that the god *Eros* need not *be aischros* and *kakos* just because he is neither *kalos* nor ἀγαθός. She says “or have you not realized that there is something in between wisdom and ignorance?” (ἢ οὐκ ἤσθησαι ὅτι ἔστιν τι μεταξύ σοφίας καὶ ἀμαθίας;) to convince Socrates that there is also something in between “ugly and repulsive” and “good and beautiful” (Pl. *Symp.* 202a). Alfredo lights on the “in-between” path when it comes to love through his experience with the androgynous hotel worker.

The changes that Aciman makes to the content of Diotima and Socrates’ dialogue allude to the *Symposium*’s own destabilization of the hard and fast lines Athenians drew between *erastes* and *eromenos*, particularly through Alcibiades’ speech. There we see that the categories of *erastes* and *eromenos* are confounded by Alcibiades’ attempts both to court and to be courted by Socrates, who in turn takes on active and passive courting roles with Alcibiades. When describing his attempts to convince Socrates to be his *erastes*, Alcibiades says “Then I summoned him to dine with me, really as though I were an *erastes* making designs on a boy” (προκαλοῦμαι δὴ αὐτὸν πρὸς τὸ συνδειπνεῖν, ἀτεχνῶς ὥσπερ ἐραστής παιδικοῖς ἐπιβουλεύων, 217c). He remarks later that this is the sort of thing Socrates does often when he says, “he has not done this to me alone, but also to Charmides, the son of Glaucon, and Euthydemus, the son of Diocles, and very many others, whom he deceives that he, the *erastes*, himself becomes rather

more the beloved than the *erastes*” (οὐκ ἐμὲ μόνον ταῦτα πεποίηκεν, ἀλλὰ καὶ Χαρμίδην τὸν Γλαύκωνος καὶ Εὐθύδημον τὸν Διοκλέους καὶ ἄλλους πάνυ πολλούς, οὓς οὗτος ἔξαπατῶν ὡς ἐραστῆς παιδικὰ μᾶλλον αὐτὸς καθίσταται ἀντ’ ἐραστοῦ, 222b). When Socrates remains unpersuaded by Alcibiades’ charm, Alcibiades confesses that he shared a couch with Socrates, but that Socrates did not try to do anything sexual with him. Though Alcibiades’ speech works in the narrative of the *Symposium* to demonstrate Socrates’ adherence to the “morality implicit in Diotima’s speech” (Dover 1980: 164), Socrates and those who come to love him in turn are nevertheless represented as men who play both the roles of *erastes* and *eromenos* within one relationship. Relationships with Socrates confound the normative cultural distinction of the *erastes* as the older partner and the *eromenos* as the younger partner.

As we have seen here and in his other allusions to classical literature, Aciman represents Elio and Oliver as destabilizers of the power dynamics presupposed by their difference in age. As the sole narrator in the story, we see from Elio’s perspective that he himself is often the one actively seeking Oliver, though Oliver is the older of the two, and the two characters often take on both active and passive courting roles. Aciman is highlighting this back and forth play with active and passive roles in the *Symposium* in order to represent the mutuality of Elio and Oliver’s relationship. Thus he creates a relationship in which consent between the two lovers is clear and reciprocal. He is drawing upon an ancient cultural institution whose strict power dynamics do not lend themselves to consent without coercion, yet he chooses an ancient example that undermines that very institution’s power dynamics.

Elio and Alcibiades

Elio is meant to be like Alcibiades, and this connection is made especially clear in “The San Clemente Syndrome.” Aciman verified that he meant for Elio to be like Alcibiades, because he wanted the younger of the two men to be the pursuer (Aciman 2019). Elio, like Alcibiades, becomes the active lover of one we would have expected to fill the active role. He also makes comments that are meant to allude directly to the speech of Alcibiades. For example, at the beginning of their stay in Rome, Elio says:

I wanted no secrets, no screens, nothing between us. Little did I know that if I relished the gust of candor that bound us tighter each time we swore *my body is your body*, it was also because I enjoyed rekindling that tiny lantern of unsuspected shame. It cast a spare glow precisely where part of me would have preferred the dark. Shame trailed instant intimacy. Could intimacy endure once indecency was spent and our bodies had run out of tricks? (Aciman 2007: 172)

Alcibiades also remarks that his feelings of “shame” play an essential role in his love for Socrates, saying “there is an experience I have in the presence of this man alone among men, an experience no one would expect to find in me, the experience of feeling shame: I feel shame before this man alone” (πρὸς τοῦτον μόνον ἀνθρώπων, ὃ οὐκ ἄν τις οἴοιτο ἐν ἐμοὶ ἐνεῖναι, τὸ αἰσχύνεσθαι ὄντινοῦν: ἐγὼ δὲ τοῦτον μόνον αἰσχύνομαι, 216b). Elio’s attempts to communicate his feelings for Oliver throughout the novel are also very similar to Alcibiades’ attempts to get Socrates’ attention: both Elio and Alcibiades are met with apparent indifference from the men they are attempting to court, and they both must be careful as they send signs to their would-be lovers. Alcibiades suggests that he has done everything he could to let Socrates know that he would like Socrates to treat him as an *eromenos*, but he is continuously frustrated by Socrates’

self-control (Pl. *Symp.* 217b–c). Within Elio’s relationship with Oliver, Oliver plays Socrates to Elio’s Alcibiades, inasmuch as he represents a careful and prudent *erastes* to Elio. Oliver often appeals to the importance of self-control when Elio presses him. After Elio and Oliver have kissed for the first time at Monet’s berm, Oliver says, “We can’t do this—I know myself. So far we’ve behaved. We’ve been good. Neither of us has done anything to feel ashamed of. Let’s keep it that way. I want to be good” (Aciman 2007: 82). Oliver exercises restraint that is appropriate for an *erastes*, and it is shame that governs his restraint.

Aciman encourages his readers to reexamine shame in Plato’s *Symposium* as a sexual experience of its own, rather than as a moral sense that rejects sexuality. In Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium* “shame,” *aidos* or *aiskhune*,⁸ is crucial to the appropriate pursuit of one’s erotic desires. In the *Phaedrus* Socrates states that a feeling of *aidos* should overtake a man when he sees a beautiful boy (254e). This feeling is induced by the “charioteer’s” white, good horse, which represents a man’s restraint in the face of his base appetites that excite the other, black horse. The word *aidos* is synonymous with the feeling Alcibiades expresses in the *Symposium* through the verb *aiskhunomai*. Here, again, we see that Alcibiades is filling the role of the *erastes* in his feelings of *aiskhune/aidos* for Socrates, who takes the role of the *eromenos* in Alcibiades’ speech. Elio’s shame seems to incite and encourage his sexual appetites rather than restrain them, but it is exactly the restraint of his desires that Elio finds erotic. This erotic tension

⁸ Konstan (2006: 92) has distinguished these terms by calling *aidos* a “prospective” or “inhibitory” sense, which compels one to behave in such a way as to preserve one’s image. *Aiskhune*, on the other hand, is “restrictive,” looking back with regret on an action that causes shame. However, the verb *aiskhunomai*, which appears in Alcibiades’ speech in the *Symposium*, can indicate both the prospective (*aidos*) and reflective (*aiskhune*) senses of shame. In any case, while the particular difference between these words merits deeper philological study, their distinction is not one that Aciman would be attuned to, and thus falls outside of the scope of this thesis. That these two words are often translated as “shame” is enough to draw a connection between Aciman’s use of shame and Plato’s use of *aidos/aiskhune*.

between restraint and sexual desire is also clearly articulated in the *Phaedrus* when Socrates says:

ζεῖ οὖν ἐν τούτῳ ὅλη καὶ ἀνακηκίει, καὶ ὅπερ τὸ τῶν ὀδοντοφυούντων πάθος περὶ τοὺς ὀδόντας γίγνεται ὅταν ἄρτι φύωσιν, κνησὶς τε καὶ ἀγανάκτησις περὶ τὰ οὖλα, ταῦτόν δὴ πέπονθεν ἢ τοῦ πτεροφυεῖν ἀρχομένου ψυχὴ ζεῖ τε καὶ ἀγανακτεῖ καὶ γαργαλίζεται φύουσα τὰ πτερά. ὅταν μὲν οὖν βλέπουσα πρὸς τὸ τοῦ παιδὸς κάλλος, ἐκεῖθεν μέρη ἐπιόντα καὶ ῥέοντ'—ἃ δὴ διὰ ταῦτα ἴμερος καλεῖται—δεχομένη ἄρδηταί τε καὶ θερμαίνεται, λωφᾶ τε τῆς ὀδύνης [251δ] καὶ γέγηθεν.

Now the whole soul seethes and throbs in this condition. Like a child whose teeth are just starting to grow in, and its gums are all aching and itching—that is exactly how the soul feels: it seethes and throbs and feels irritation as it grows wings.

Then when it gazes upon the beauty of the boy and receives the particles flowing and coming upon him from the boy—and this is why it is called “yearning”—it moistens and becomes warm, and it takes rest from pain and rejoices. (251c–d)⁹

While the *erastes* restrains himself from his desires through shame, his experience is in itself erotic. This characterization of shame-induced restraint resonates “with that most insistent sign of active masculine desire, the erection of the penis” (Bianchi 2016: 150). Shame, as force of restraint, builds sexual tension, and the eruption of shame causes a release of this tension. Elio’s transgressions of the boundaries that his shame sets cause him to feel intimate with Oliver in new ways. However, he must continually transgress to keep that feeling alive, noting the unsustainability of maintaining that intimacy.

⁹ All excerpts from Plato’s *Phaedrus* are taken from Fowler 1995.

Through his connection with Alcibiades, Elio brings an ancient example of transgressive sexuality to bear on a modern homosexual relationship, which in turn affects our reading of the *Symposium*. Elio's feelings of erotic shame compel us to reconsider the queer significance of this emotion in ancient erotic discourse. Indeed, Aciman's reimagining of the *Symposium* through Elio and Oliver provokes the same questions that have been raised by the work of queer historians in recent years. These questions center around the affective responses of ancient and historical individuals to same-sex love/desire. In her 2016 essay "A Queer Feeling for Plato," Emanuela Bianchi takes up this question in the hope of elucidating queer or gender-bending physical responses to homoerotic stimuli in Plato's dialogues (Bianchi 2016: 141).

"The Ascent" through the San Clemente Syndrome

The San Clemente Syndrome is, for Alfredo, an underlying theoretical framework for the way human beings embody a multiplicity of identities, and it functions as a kind of trope whereby Aciman gives a synopsis of his ideas about identity in the entire novel:

I called it the San Clemente Syndrome. Today's Basilica of San Clemente is built on the site of what once was a refuge for persecuted Christians. The home of the Roman consul Titus Flavius Clemens, it was burnt down during Emperor Nero's reign. Next to its charred remains, in what must have been a large, cavernous vault, the Romans built an underground pagan temple dedicated to Mithras, God of the Morning, Light of the World, over whose temple the early Christians built another church, dedicated—coincidentally or not, this is a matter to be further excavated—to another Clement, Pope St. Clement, on top of which came yet another church that burnt down and on the site of which stands today's basilica.

And the digging could go on and on. Like the subconscious, like love, like memory, like time itself, like every single one of us, the church is built on the ruins of subsequent restorations, there is no rock bottom, there is no first anything, no last anything, just layers and secret passageways and interlocking chambers, like the Christian Catacombs, and right along these, even a Jewish Catacomb.

(Aciman 2007: 192)

Alfredo then confesses that this is the moral of his story in Thailand, where he meets the gender-ambiguous night clerk (Aciman 2007: 192). He is saying that there is no singular, all-encompassing identity for anyone or anything. Like San Clemente, we are made up of a multiplicity of identities, many of which contradict and “don’t get along with one another,” as Aciman has said (Goldman Sachs Talks 2018: 3:20). Indeed, the place where San Clemente stands was formerly a place of Christian persecution and has since become a place of Christian worship.

The “moral” of the San Clemente Syndrome, as Alfredo puts it, is directly opposed to the philosophical “ascent” of Plato’s *Symposium*. As Alfredo makes the San Clemente Syndrome the “moral” of his story, his discussion of the church takes the place of the ascent in Aciman’s retelling of the *Symposium*. However, Alfredo conceptualizes San Clemente’s identity through its multiplicity of identities, whereas Plato famously conceptualizes all things in a singular form. The San Clemente Syndrome, then, is directly counterintuitive to Plato’s philosophical ascent. The church marks the procession of time, but time does not move the church in any way to a more true version of itself: in all its various forms it is “like the subconscious, like love, like memory, like time itself, like every single one of us.” Indeed, that “love” is among these semblances of San Clemente is a pointed refusal of the Platonic ascent. There is not a higher or

lower form of love for Aciman or Alfredo, but love has aspects we might define as high or low, and which Plato, in fact, defines as high and low, that are equally relevant in love.

The San Clemente Syndrome metapoetically resonates with the project of classical reception that Aciman takes on in the novel as well. As I have discussed in the previous chapter, Aciman has recast and re-envisioned Ovid's mythological narratives in his own narrative about a pair of modern lovers. He does not tell us the stories of the *Metamorphoses* word-for-word but changes them, bringing their themes to bear on the modern world and shining a light on their subtle resonances with modern sexualities. In "The San Clemente Syndrome" section, Plato's *Symposium* is retold with a new and almost anti-Platonic meaning. Despite the strict, gendered imbalance of Athenian pederasty, Aciman highlights the confusion of age-hierarchical sexual power dynamics by Alcibiades, who subverts these dynamics in Athenian society, just as San Clemente brings "clemency" to the Christians formerly persecuted by Titus Flavius Clemens. The San Clemente church is a symbol of dynamic classical reception, "built on the ruins of subsequent restorations." Aciman's own engagement with the *Symposium* as a queer text is built upon a history of queer readings of the text prominent among the Uranians. The Uranian reading of the *Symposium* figures as one restoration of the text upon which Aciman builds his own reading, one that does not retain the gendered sexual power dynamics that the Uranians maintained in their praise of Athenian pederasty.

Platonic Ascent?: Problems with the Film

While the novel engages thoughtfully and dynamically with the *Symposium*, the film offers a static retelling of the *Symposium*'s "ascent" narrative that eroticizes the unbalanced power dynamics of Athenian pederasty. In the film, Elio and Oliver spend a few days travelling to

Rome and in the city itself. Their trip is depicted in three distinct settings, none of which include the poetry reading or dinner party presented in the book. The first of these scenes shows Elio and Oliver lounging naked in a hotel room, looking out over the streets of Rome. After Elio has fallen asleep, we see Oliver looking apprehensively into space, thinking about the short amount of time the two lovers will have together before he returns to the United States. The following scene is set in the mountains, where Elio and Oliver climb higher and higher to find a beautiful mountain vista with green trees and large waterfalls. The two lovers shout with enthusiasm and call each other by their own names, as they did when they first had sex. We cut from there to the final scene, where Elio and Oliver are kissing, drunk in an empty street in Rome. After a brief run-in with some other tourist, Elio becomes ill, vomits, and is then pressed up against the wall where Oliver kisses him until the scene fades out. Here the philosophical ascent Diotima describes in the *Symposium* is presented, but in reverse order.

The second and third scenes are Guadagnino's allusion to Diotima's speech. She tells Socrates that one hoping to be initiated into the ways of love must begin "to love one particular body" (ένὸς αὐτὸν σώματος ἐρᾶν , 210a), then ascend from there to a love of beauty for its own sake, as an idea separated from physical beauty (αὐτὸ καθ' αὐτὸ μεθ' αὐτοῦ μονοειδὲς ἀεὶ ὄν, Pl. *Symp.* 211b). A lover begins by recognizing beauty in one body, then recognizing beauty in all bodies, realizing that mental beauty is superior to physical beauty, loving knowledge, and finally loving beauty itself. Just as physical beauty becomes unimportant to the lover as he ascends, so too are the sexual aspects of Elio and Oliver's relationship downplayed in the mountains: there is no sexual or even physical contact between the two, only what seems to be a very dear friendship, companions observing the beauty of the high mountains. In the next scene, however, the ascent is reversed. The city of Rome, physically lower in altitude, is a locus of pointed

physicality: the lovers kiss and embrace one another, and Elio, coming down from the drunken excitement of the night, vomits in the street. Oliver and Elio's drunken kiss occurs in the novel as well, but it is not sharply contrasted with the concept of the ascent, which Aciman pointedly undermines in his representation of the *Symposium*.

While Aciman's reception of the *Symposium* encourages readers to look at the feelings and relationships of the dialogue in a new, queer way, Guadagnino alludes to the philosophical ideas of the dialogue without confronting the problem of pederastic sexual power dynamics as they are mapped onto Elio and Oliver. He deletes "The San Clemente Syndrome" scenes and instead gives us a few summary scenes of Elio and Oliver's trip to Rome. The film portrays the philosophical ascent through scenes in symbolically high and low locations. Instead of moving from the low to the high, as the philosophical ascent does, the scenes move from high to low. This symbolically represents a reversal of the ascent: the lovers begin at an ideal state of love and descend to a very physical encounter. We need to be careful of what this reversed translation of the ascent suggests. Guadagnino seems to reverse it in order to excavate the underlying physicality of any declaration of spiritual or philosophical love between a man and an adolescent, a goal problematically inherent in the works of the Uranians. Nevertheless, he does little to assure us that this relationship is not just as exploitative as the Uranians' idealization of same-sex desire through relationships portrayed in the *Symposium*. Without Elio's express consent given through his own narration of the events, the film's final scene in Rome looks disturbingly like a man taking advantage of a drunk teenager in the streets late at night, as the youth's perceptions blur into a haze.

Conclusion

It is evident in André Aciman's novel that we can still make use of ancient writings through thoughtful, critical interrogations of the ideas those writings pose to us. In a time where we are skeptical of the elitism and asymmetry of ancient Athenian pederasty, texts vital to our understanding of that elitism and asymmetry can still be questioned and used to shed light on our modern experiences of love and sexual desire. Yet Guadagnino's adaptation of Aciman's story takes for granted the ethical infallibility of ancient art and literature. Beneath Guadagnino's beautiful, luscious, classically inspired scenes of love in the Italian country, however, lurks the unseemly specter of sexual exploitation and abuse. This specter hides in the film's resonances with Uranian poetry, which similarly used classics to aestheticize asymmetrical relationships with young boys; it hides in his Ovidian *locus amoenus*, where fear for Elio's safety is palpable; and it hides in his playful excavation of the exploitative sexuality of the institution of Athenian pederasty. We must be cautious of the power this film has through its use of classics to normalize and glorify asymmetrical sexual relationships that so often become manipulative.



(Fig. 1) Wilhelm Von Gloeden, *Two Seated Sicilian Youths*, c. 1900.

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