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Seeing and Tasting the Divine: Simeon Solomon's Homoerotic Sacrament (Dominic Janes)

Images operate even more powerfully in the oral than in the optical channel; that is to say, we do not merely 'see' pictures, we 'drink' in their images with our eyes [...] but images are also, notoriously, a drink that fails to satisfy our thirst. Their main function is to awaken desire; to create, not gratify thirst; to provoke a sense of lack and craving by giving us the apparent presence of something and taking it away in the same gesture.¹

W. J. T. Mitchell, one of the most prominent American theorists of visual culture, raised these ideas in the course of his study into the 'lives and loves of images' the aim of which was to examine the diversity of ways in which objects and images engage with their viewers. The implications of his notion of the power of orality in the process of viewing are manifold. If he is right then bodily desires centred on physical consumption are central to the viewing of all manner of images and not simply those which are conventionally labelled as pornographic.

The act of consumption in modern life comes with the prerequisite of choice and is, therefore, imbued with the tendency to act as a display of personal taste. Shopping, notably in the case of 'shopping for' sexual partners, is not simply down to visual likes and dislikes but involves the complete sensorium in order to engage fully with the body and person of the other.

I will be exploring the ways in which the Victorian painter Simeon Solomon (1840-1905) attempted to use painting as a medium for an attempted legitimization of same-sex bodily contact. His vehicle for this was the depiction of scenes evoking Holy Communion and the ingestion of the host as an example of bodily penetration of the male as purification. This elision of male to male desire and the Christian

¹ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Pictures Want: the Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 80.

sublime was a radical strategy that was shared by a number of later aesthetes, notably Oscar Wilde. Yet both Solomon and Wilde were revealed not as sublime, but as sublime posers, when they had been ruined by revelations concerning their supposedly low tastes for, respectively, toilet sex and telegraph boys. The perceived illegitimacy of homoerotic desire can therefore be seen, in different ways, as the result of a tragic failure to taste beauty on the part of both the aesthetes and their opponents.

Solomon's Mystical Union

Emblematic fancies in which a mystical union of pagan and Christian symbolism has been effected, according to a sentiment which does not commend itself very strongly to the present writer.

For the critic Sidney Colvin, writing in 1871, elements of the recent art of Simeon Solomon left a bad taste in the mouth.² He believed that the paintings 'err a little, I think, on the side of affectation and over-doing in the facial type, of insufficient manliness, or ambiguous and indiscriminate sentimentalism'.³ Such suspicions of gender subversion were nothing compared with the critical opprobrium that ensued when, in the following year (just as Colvin was becoming Slade Professor of Art at the University of Cambridge) Solomon was arrested for 'attempting to commit sodomy' in a public lavatory in London. His personal reputation, such as it was, was ruined, yet he retained the following as a colourist which he had gained at the shows of his water-colours, notably, those at the Dudley Gallery. One writer had been sufficiently impressed (or secretly sympathetic) as to comment that one suspect work, *Sacramentum Amoris* (1868), was 'perhaps the best example of one of the painter's many manners, that of the classic warmed by colour and softened by romance'.⁵ The original watercolour is lost but we can appreciate its form if not its colouration by means of the surviving photograph by Frederick Hollyer [figure 1].

² Sidney Colvin, 'Simeon Solomon – Frederick Walker', in [no editor given], *English Painters of the Present Day* (London: Seeley, Jackson and Halliday, 1871), p. 14.

³ Colvin, 'Simeon Solomon', p. 15.

⁵ Anon., 'Dudley Gallery. Fifth General Exhibition of Drawings,' *The Art Journal* 1 March (1869), p. 81.

Simeon Solomon created in his work an increasingly clear homosexual identity and sensibility. One aspect of this involved depicting the luscious surfaces and forms of a range of religious rituals and their attractive male deities, priests and acolytes. This resulted in the creation of idealised worlds of quasi-religious homoerotic sensual experience in which spirit and flesh were one in a harmony of beauty. *Sacramentum Amoris* (1868) is a high point in this process. A facially androgynous male youth exhibits his enticing flesh. In one hand he bears a flowering staff and in the other holds an extraordinary object. It is a clear vessel containing a winged youth and streaming with inner light, which is framed and surrounded by more images of winged youths. Roberto Ferrari refers to this as a 'glowing lantern'.⁶ The same detail is shown in the surviving water-colour sketch in the British Museum.⁷

The identity of this object can be divined by reference to *The Mystery of Faith* (1870) in which a Catholic priest holds up a monstrance in which the host, glowing brilliantly, is displayed [figure 2]. The brilliance of the host is connected to heaven by a shaft of upward slanting light which aligns with the upper chest of the priest. His robes glow almost as brilliantly, producing a corresponding arrangement of white and gold that echoes the host in its monstrance since both represent encased bodies radiant with divine light. The priest is evoked as a unified element in the sacred space of a church, on the walls of which his body finds its visual echo in fresco. This composition appears to be a drama of sight in which the shape of the white host evokes that of the black irises of the priest's eyes, thus offering the prospect of visual entry of the Lord into the soul. However, the holy wafer was not made primarily for visual consumption, but for a more thorough-going dissolution through the mouth. This work therefore evokes the multi-sensual and intense bodily engagement of the priest with the host. Furthermore, applying such ideas to the earlier work, it appears that two years before Solomon had, in fact, painted a pagan monstrance in which, in place of the wafer, there is a winged male youth who was

⁶ Roberto C. Ferrari, 'Pre-Raphaelite patronage: Simeon Solomon's letters to James Leathart and Frederick Leyland', in ed. Colin Cruise, *Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Merrell, 2005), pp. 47-56, at p. 51.

⁷ Cruise, *Love Revealed*, pp. 156-7, fig. 115.

almost obscured by his own radiance. The implication is that the youth is an object not just for the visual, but also for the oral sublime of bodily consumption.

I began this paper by saying that there were those who thought Solomon's work to be in bad taste in the sense of being over-wrought, but there is another important sense in which evil tastes might be evoked by these paintings. Since the point of a monstrosity is to enable one to adore what one is destined to consume, these paintings were challenging not simply to the morality of the sense of vision, but also to that of bodily decorum. In other words, what was presented in these works was an agenda, not just for gaze, but for direct bodily interaction. Since the host was (or, depending on one's theology, symbolised) Jesus and, as the winged figure was also clearly male, what was on the menu was a consumption by men of men which was posited as an act of spiritual transcendence. That much of Solomon's work was thought by critics to be in bad taste may be elucidated, in these particular works, in relation to conceptual slippages between the notions of moral judgement and sensual taste.

Foods, Sacred and Profane

Good taste and judgement in food and art was, by this date, the subject of intense moral scrutiny. The evangelical Protestant revival that had been gathering pace from the latter half of the eighteenth century led to a questioning, in middle-class circles in particular, of the value and morality of worldly pleasures and of the senses through which we perceive them. Such concerns were applied to all the senses, including that of taste, which was subject to judgement from proponents of moral reform. The familiar contemporary dichotomy between delicious foods that are 'bad for you' and those virtuous healthy options that you know you should prefer was very much operative in Victorian England. Just as art was widely expected to have some sort of useful 'meaning', so eating was imbued with a sense of duty and purpose. In one of a number of attempts to create a moral aesthetic schema, the prominent architect James Fergusson (1808-86) suggested that the aim was to find a balance between technical, aesthetic and phonetic (meaning communicative)

attributes of beauty. In his system, scores were assigned for each category; 0 being low, 11 high. Heating was not held to be fully beautiful since it provided the scores of 11, 1, and 0; nor were gardening, 4, 6, 2; painting, 3, 3, 6, nor eloquence, 0, 1, 11. In relation to food Fergusson commented that 'I perceive a perfect object of gastronomy to consist of 7 or 8 parts of plain hunger-satisfying food, and 4 or 5 of palatable ingredients'.⁸ This relegation of aesthetics to being simply one of three major components of beauty fits well with his observation that art now 'submits to be useful, as well as sublime'.⁹ This is a reflection of the widespread British view that food and painting alike were validated according to the tenets of utility and morality.

An important survey of attitudes to food in the early nineteenth century as discussed in the works of Jane Austen found that this was a society that emphasised the social structures and rituals of luncheon and dinner, rather than paying close attention to the taste of what was on the plate.¹⁰ In Victorian Britain, however, people who could afford to eat enough were offered an increasing deluge of advice on gastronomy, morality and health via such manuals as Thomas Dutton's *Digestion and Diet: Rationally Discussed* (1892).¹¹ The dangers of insufficient mastication being apprehended, science offered such promising novelties as the application of light doses of electricity to cheek muscles so as to promote the ability to chew with Protestant zeal. People who eat well look healthy, are upright and have a sound mind and sound body, readers were told; how different from 'the opposite being, those who suffer from gluttony, gout, indigestion, and *liver*. Like the poor they are always with us, and can generally be found reigning supreme in those large London boarding-houses which have of late years risen up like mushrooms everywhere'.¹² Above all one must avoid enjoyment and excitement when eating. It was important

⁸ James Fergusson, *An Historical Inquiry into the True Principles of Beauty in Art, More Especially with Reference to Architecture* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1849), p. 140.

⁹ Lady Sydney Morgan, *Letter to Cardinal Wiseman in Answer to his 'Remarks on Lady Morgan's Statements Regarding St. Peter's Chair'*, 3rd ed. (London: Charles Westerton, 1851), p. 29.

¹⁰ Maggie Lane, *Jane Austen and Food* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1995).

¹¹ Thomas Dutton, *Digestion and Diet: Rationally Discussed* (London: Henry Kimpton, 1892).

¹² Dutton, *Digestion*, p. 4.

not to study, or read 'any engrossing work' at table, lest there be, warned the author of *The Demon of Dyspepsia*, 'derangement of the human saliva'.¹³

How might such sense and sensibility regard the love feast that is the Mass? Miri Rubin, in an important study of the rise of the cult of Corpus Christi during the later Middle Ages, emphasises that the raising up of the host by the officiating priest was an innovation of the twelfth century associated with a renewed focus on the body of Christ: 'at the elevation [when bread became flesh, and wine blood] all senses were called into play. Bells pealed, incense was burnt, hands were clasped, supplications were mouthed'.¹⁴ Theologians disputed the view that one could 'consume the host by sight', and insisted in addition on the ingestion of wafer and wine.¹⁵ Communion for the laity was typically an annual event when, having 'viewed the whole body' of Christ, they took him into themselves – all of this, presumably in a state of the highest excitement.¹⁶ In the Catholic tradition, the monstrance held not just a disk, but the body of Christ who was, we may recall, often painted and sculpted as a beautiful young man. In *The Mystery of Faith*, then, we find a young man holding up, with the eyes of faith, a young man. Moreover, when placed against bourgeois Protestant English moralities of eating, we find that in place of disinterest in the taste of food, we find fascination at its breadliness or fleshliness, and an extreme of salivatory excitation at what 'we are about to receive'. That this painting probably shows the Benediction, the blessing of the congregation, rather than the Mass itself, means that it evokes the sense of food promised but withheld in the trap of the canvas; perhaps leaving the craving viewer to seek satisfaction elsewhere in order to complete the sublime ritual. Even in the absence of anti-Catholicism, one can see that, in relation to the widespread Victorian morality of the consumption of food, the search for the oral sublime was likely to be seen as a dangerous pursuit. *The Mystery of Faith* finds moral justification for its aesthetic stance by reference to the vital importance for Christians of taking Communion. However, Solomon was of

¹³ Adolphus E. Bridger, *The Demon of Dyspepsia or Digestion Perfect and Imperfect* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1888), pp. 81 and 91.

¹⁴ Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 58.

¹⁵ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 67.

¹⁶ Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, p. 55.

course Jewish, and, besides, his *Sacramentum Amoris* came equipped with no such justificatory apparatus. So when Solomon painted a Catholic priest one might think that his motivation derived not from the mysteries of faith, but from those of sensual desire.

The majority of the viewers of Victorian art in England were likely to have been Anglican: this body encompassed a considerable range of opinion concerning the Eucharist as a result of the widening split between Anglo-Catholic High and Evangelical Low Church opinion in the wake of the Oxford Movement. Of all Church ritual, the Mass with Holy Communion was perhaps the most important, at least for Catholics. The sacramental and sacrificial aspects of the priestly role were as vital for them as the didactic and sermonising role was for the Protestant minister. For the Catholic apologist Daniel Rock, priesthood was about sacrifice and 'nature herself invariably inspired man with the idea that *sacrifice* was the first – the most essential act of exterior religion'.¹⁷ The Roman Catholic position was to go beyond the Real Presence, when the divine spirit is present, to Transubstantiation, when wafer and wine become body and blood by the words of consecration. And for Rock, countering Protestant accusations that these substances *tasted* of bread and wine, you should not taste with your tongue, but with your faith.¹⁸

For many dissenters this was anathema. For them, the bread of the Eucharist was but the image or representation of the Lord, so in the Holy Communion priests were doing reverence to an image, in other words they were idolaters.¹⁹

What possible difference can there be made between the idolatry of the man who bows down to a bit of wood he has fashioned into an image... and the idolatry of the man who pretends by the utterance of a few words to cause bread and wine to become the Body and

¹⁷ Daniel Rock, '*Hierurgia*', or *Transubstantiation, Invocation of Saints, Relics and Purgatory*, 2nd ed., (London: C. Dolman, 1851), p. 118.

¹⁸ Rock, '*Hierurgia*', p. 168.

¹⁹ Thomas Maguire, *Important Lecture in Answer to a Protestant, on Images and Relics, Delivered by the Rev. T. Maguire, on Good Friday Evening Last, in Adam and Eve Chapel* (Dublin: M'Mullen, 1840), p. 6.

Blood of Christ and so Christ Himself, and then pray to the idol that they have so made?

asked the Baptist minister Beeman.²⁰ He objected, as evidence of such idolatry, to the Anglo-Catholic Prynne's *Eucharistic Manual* and particularly to phrases like these: "hail, Sweetest Jesus! *Prostrate in lowliest devotion*, I worship and adore thee"; "*most adorable Body, I adore Thee* with all the powers of my soul" and "*most adorable blood*, that washeth away all our sins, *I adore thee*" [note Beeman's italics].²¹ A sceptic, taking Communion at Anglo-Catholic All Saints, Margaret St., watched a priest upending the Communion vessel so high, as he drained it into his mouth, that he almost lost his balance. In such scenes we can gain a strong sense of hostile viewers finding the ritual overblown and ridiculous.²² Taking this one stage further was the prominent Irish anti-Papist campaigner MacGhee, Rector of Holywell, Huntingdonshire, who, in Exeter Hall in 1853, brought in a wafer-making machine, and showed it to the audience. However, to save the feelings of Catholics, the Rector did not have a wafer-making display, as he was intending to do, for 'on reflection, I thought better it not to do so' since it might appear to be in bad taste.²³

The Anglo-Catholic view was more emphatic than it was clear or straightforward. The difference between Real Presence and Transubstantiation was not always easy to justify or explain. The key point was that the former was concerned with the spiritual presence of Christ in his transformed body, rather than in his 'carnal body' from before his Resurrection.²⁴ Even this was regarded in the 1830s and 1840s as going too far. In 1843, the Tractarian leader Pusey preached a university sermon on

²⁰ Thomas Oyler Beeman, *Ritualism: Doctrine not Dress. Notes of Lectures on Ritualism, the Development of Tractarianism, with Additions, including Remarks on the Charge of the Bishop of Salisbury* (Cranbrook: Geo. Waters and Son, 1868), p. 166.

²¹ Beeman, *Ritualism*, pp. 164-5.

²² Anon., 'A Churchman of the Reformation', *Tractarian Practices in Protestant Churches: Three Letters, Reprinted from the "Christian Guardian", and Now Addressed to the Right Hon. and Right Rev. the Lord Bishop of London, and the Protestant Churchmen of the Diocese* (London: J. H. Jackson, 1850), p. 22.

²³ Robert James MacGhee, *The Church of Rome Proved Unable to Justify the Sacrifice of the Mass, or the Idolatry of the Wafer. A Lecture Delivered at Exeter Hall on Wednesday, April 20th 1853* (London: Arthur Hall, Virtue and Co., 1853), p. 57.

²⁴ A., Härderlin, *The Tractarian Understanding of the Eucharist* (Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksells, 1965), p. 156.

'the holy Eucharist as a comfort to the penitent', in which he advocated the Real Presence and as a result of which he was suspended for two years from preaching in the University of Oxford.²⁵ Denison, Archdeacon of Taunton, was prosecuted from 1854 to 1858 for advocating the Real Presence. The case was finally to be thrown out on the technicality that it had not commenced within the two years required by the legislation.²⁶ Keble, hoping that the Denison case would not set a precedent, also advocated the Real Presence. He drew the parallel that, just as Christ 'is the name most expressive of his humiliation, *therefore*, His thoughtful servants would instinctively select it in preference to all His other names for especial honour and reverence'. Although Christ's body is his inferior part and seat of humiliation yet so should be specially honoured.²⁷

It is perhaps hard for a non-believer to capture the intense emotions of this debate. William Goode, Rector of St. Margaret Lothbury, London, one of the most assiduous scholarly opponents of the Anglo-Catholics, wrote a thousand pages refuting these positions, asserting the problems of reading the fathers of the early Church.²⁸ And, in a supplement to this work, claimed that 'if there was a real substantial presence of the body of Christ in the bread [which Goode denied], there is a bodily presence, and the presence of Christ's human body involves the presence of a material substance'.²⁹ Behind this we can sometimes see that there lay, not just anti-Catholic prejudice, but also feelings of intense bodily disgust at the thought that Christ might join with the imperfect body of the communicant. One writer invited the reader to imagine someone who 'swallows that immaculate God down his throat, reeking most frequently with the fumes of stinking tobacco and spirits, and food in the process of digestion'.³⁰ As Bird, Vicar of Gainsborough, and public enemy of transubstantiation put it, 'is that pure and spotless body to be thus amalgamated

²⁵ Gerald Parsons, ed., *Religion in Victorian Britain, 1, Traditions* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), p. 36.

²⁶ Parsons, *Religion*, pp. 37-8.

²⁷ John Keble, *On Eucharistical Adoration* (Oxford: John Henry and James Parker, 1857), p. 21.

²⁸ William Goode, *The Nature of Christ's Presence in the Eucharist*, 2 vols (London: Thomas Hatchard, 1856), 1, p. 611.

²⁹ William Goode, *A Supplement to His Work on the Eucharist* (London: Thomas Hatchard, 1858), p. 46.

³⁰ Anon., *Doctrine of Transubstantiation Refuted* (London: T. C. Savill, 1838), p. 27.

with all that is vile?³¹ The Eucharist was, therefore, an intense bodily experience for supporters and opponents alike which is why Solomon, who had a fascination for depicting the rituals of his own faith, may have been drawn to the subject. Furthermore, O'Malley has documented the way in which Roman Catholicism was widely constructed by Protestants as associated with sexual deviance from the norms of married life. Roman and Anglo-Catholicism thus offered a convenient cultural space in which to contest sexual and sensual mores, albeit one which was (if less so as the nineteenth century progressed) culturally and morally embattled.³²

Solomon may also have been attracted by another aspect of the Communion ritual, that of submission to the male body, not just of Christ, but also to that of the priest, since such ritual placed worshippers in the subservient position of being fed. Alleged clerical abuse of the bodies of the laity (including their mouths) was a stock in trade of anti-Catholic abuse at the time. For instance, the militant Protestant Irishman M. Hobart Seymour announced to a packed hall of the righteous that he 'would not trust himself to speak of that unmanly fellow who so far forgot what was due to woman, as to make a lady, young and beautiful, degrade herself at his feet, and with her tongue make the sign of the cross upon the floor, which had been polluted and defiled by his dirty footsteps'.³³ The accused was the Anglo-Catholic priest Prynne who we have seen above adoring the body of Christ in the Eucharist. Whilst the tongue cross was discussed elsewhere as being 'a usual penance of the Roman Catholics', Prynne denied he had ordered it after the young lady's confession to him;³⁴ the early Church had used severe penances, but this he did not do. Instead

³¹ Charles Smith Bird, *Transubstantiation Tried by Scripture and Reason* (London: Hatchards, 1839), p. 17.

³² Patrick O'Malley, *Catholicism, Sexual Deviance and Victorian Gothic Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

³³ M. Hobart Seymour, *Nunneries. A Lecture Delivered in the Assembly Rooms, Bath on Wednesday, April 21 1852* (London: Seeleys, 1852), p. 36 and refuted in George Rundle Prynne, *Private Confession, Penance, and Absolution, Authoritatively Taught in the Church of England. An Address Published in Consequence of Some Statements Contained in a Pamphlet Written by the Rev. James Spurrell, A.M., Vicar of Great Shelford, Cambridge. Also A Letter to the Rev. M. Hobart Seymour in Reply to Some Remarks Made by Him in a Lecture on Nunneries*, 2nd ed. (London: Joseph Masters, 1852), p. 24.

³⁴ Anon., 'E. I. O.', *The Scarlet Book; Showing the Connection of the Roman Catholic Ceremonies with the Pagan Rites. With an Account of the Bishops, Patriarchs, and Popes of Rome, from A.D. 60. Also an Explanation of the Revelation of St. John the Divine, as it Applies to Modern Events ...* By E.

he required the reciting of penitential psalms which was not, in itself, papist. Moreover, he claimed that people wanted stronger punishments than confessors wished to give, since 'persons in the enthusiasm of their gratitude and love may seek to have burdens placed upon them which a prudent guide will rather check'.³⁵ Any punishments should be addressed to the soul, not the body, but the 'guilty member' should share in the punishment.³⁶ He stressed that it was Christ rather than any such punishment that effected the cure.³⁷ Moreover, he said that he would not wish to see Seymour or anyone else lick the floor at his feet, but if he had acted like Seymour, he would take himself to his cell, and after tears 'should think it no bad act of humiliation were I, in the words of Scripture, to "lay my mouth in the dust" (Lamentations 3, 29) "and with my tongue make the sign of the Cross", in remembrance that in the Cross alone is forgiveness, on the floor of what would be to me my "oratory"'.³⁸ Prynne saw this as an exercise in morally improving humility for a person's spiritual benefit, rather than degrading humiliation for his own pleasure. But the fact that Protestant opponents read these acts in such ways suggests that they had a tendency to find perverse sexual meanings in religious oral performances that involved the sense of taste.

To protect women and children was generally considered part of 'manliness'.³⁹ Thus to be manly was to have the self-control not to indulge in undue pleasures of the flesh. It is important to note here that Catholicism in general and Anglo-Catholicism in particular were demonised by their opponents on the grounds, amongst many others, of a want of manliness. This theme, which Colvin had found in the works of Solomon, was regularly identified as present in the various forms of Anglo-Catholic medieval revivalism. As one writer put it, 'the medieval times! Which work up so well in the picturesque architecture of Boudoir-Churches, got up by fashionable

I. O., Author of 'The Reply to Cardinal Wiseman's Manifesto' (London: Piper Brothers and Co., 1852), p. 6.

³⁵ Prynne, *Private Confession*, p. 20.

³⁶ Prynne, *Private Confession*, p. 20.

³⁷ Prynne, *Private Confession*, p. 21.

³⁸ Prynne, *Private Confession*, p. 28.

³⁹ Norman Vance, *Sinews of the Spirit: the Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 17.

Decorateurs.⁴⁰ Muir's *Pagan or Christian? or, Notes for the General Public on our National Architecture* (1860) can be compared to Colvin in its attempts to find a manly way between philistine functionalism and historical sentimentality. Muir's talk of the 'pagan orders' (of classical architecture) was intended as a warning to those many Englishmen who remained prejudiced against 'Christian' Gothic architecture on principle.⁴¹ Yet he was not in favour of rood screens, piscinas, super-altars and 'monograms for the AVE MARIA'. 'Can you not leave alone these vanities,' he asks, 'and, indeed, bury them in the Romish dust-heaps from which they sprung, and to which they most righteously belong'.⁴² The key thing was the manly structure of a building, just as the art critics may have desired the manly structure of bone and muscle rather than the feminine fripperies of colour and decoration.⁴³ 'Gaudy colour', indeed, represented a want of judgement.⁴⁴ Solomon might have been stood on notice that 'the Apple that lost us Paradise pleaded to be eaten most touchingly by the raciness of its hues'.⁴⁵

It is clear that a connection was being made between the morality of meals, texts, rituals, art and architecture and the gender performances of their creators. Tractarian Oxford was the target of verse such as this, the themes of which were sufficiently powerful to become key elements in the popular construction of the homosexual aesthete in the later nineteenth century:

Yes! Yes! You centre of pretended light,
Is my best source of intellectual night.
There, aged drones, graduates in nought but years,
Pervert, with veriest fool'ries, youthful ears.
There, mentally emasculated youth,
Unlearn, soft abjects! manly Scripture truth.

⁴⁰ Morgan, *Letter*, p. 18.

⁴¹ W. J. Cockburn Muir, *Pagan or Christian? or, Notes for the General Public on our National Architecture* (London: Richard Bentley, 1860), p. 213.

⁴² Muir, *Pagan or Christian?*, p. 218.

⁴³ Muir, *Pagan or Christian?*, p. 238.

⁴⁴ Muir, *Pagan or Christian?*, p. 252.

⁴⁵ Muir, *Pagan or Christian?*, p. 253.

Poor stagnant spirits, anchor'd in the Past,
Rooted upon the bank; while sweeping fast,
Broad, bright and glorious, under Truth's glad beam,
Rolls ever onwards PROGRESS' mighty stream!⁴⁶

...Inquire what makes this university,
Prime fount of Puseyite perversity –
Root out its loathsome caves of moles and *rats*,
Its gloomy haunts of Mediaeval bats.
And when pure Protestantism reigns once more,
Restore its revenues – but *not before!*⁴⁷

The result of this 'Puseyite perversity' was, as one modern writer puts it, that 'garbed in a Tractarian cassock, the effeminatus has reappeared upon the national stage, taking up from the fop, the eunuch, and the molly its traditional role within classical republican discourse as the invariable sign of onrushing civic debility and ruin'.⁴⁸ As the century drew on and homosexuality emerges as a cultural construction, so negative and some positive readings of Roman and Anglo-Catholics become more obviously homoeroticised.⁴⁹ It is, therefore, not surprising that Solomon found Catholicism in general, and its oral excitements in particular, an interesting subject since the Catholic priest presented a figure of ambiguous masculinity. Solomon was fond of imagining such figures: one such holds the monstrosity of Eros in *Sacramentum Amoris*.

We may also recall that Solomon was particularly noted for mixing medieval and classical themes. The latter, in the sense of the wonders of Greek love, was the *locus classicus*, so to speak, of a key form of emerging homosexual identity as it was developing amongst the educated upper and middle classes. Moreover, it was

⁴⁶ Robert Dick, *The Spiritual Dunciad; or Oxford 'Tracks' to Popery. A Satire; With Notes and Appendix* (London: Charles Westerton, 1859), p. 7.

⁴⁷ Robert Dick, *The Spiritual Dunciad; or Oxford 'Tracks' to Popery. A Satire; With Notes and Appendix* (London: Charles Westerton, 1859), p. 7

⁴⁸ Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 46.

⁴⁹ David Hillard, 'Un-English and Unmanly: Anglo-Catholicism and Homosexuality', *Victorian Studies* 25 (1982), pp. 181-210.

the nude sculpture of antiquity that was a crucial inspiration. It has been commented that 'homosexuals could rarely conceive of themselves outside art and literature, outside the culture created by the Greeks [and transmitted to modernity by the Church]... For those in the cultured classes, homosexuality *was* literature and art; sex was transformed into an aesthetic act'.⁵⁰ In terms of the effortful construction of homosexual identity we can see Solomon combining classical tropes both with the powerful religious heritage of his upbringing and the ways in which Catholicism appeared to challenge contemporary English expectations of masculinity and love.⁵¹ As one might imagine a winged figure in place of the host, so one might come to see the classical beauty of bodily form concealed by vestments in *The Mystery of Faith*.

Desire and Disgust

A further important issue, which Solomon can be understood as sharing with many of his audience, was an intense struggle to overcome feelings of inner revulsion at the thought of the ingestion of another's body. A key element of Solomon's strategy was an attempt to assert the pristine morality of the homerotic gaze as having both a spiritual as well as a physical aspect to its aesthetic. Colvin commented of Solomon that he was one of those whose aim was to paint beauty; the watercolour *Sacramentum Amoris* was described by Solomon himself as 'the most *beautiful* picture I have painted', yet was this work simply an evocation of visual and bodily pleasure? It is easy to dismiss such work as *The Mystery of Faith* (1870) as little more than a luscious aesthetic pose in which what mattered most was the glorious colouring and the handsome youthfulness of the priest.⁵² One might put it in company with Wilde's Dorian Gray of whom it was rumoured:

⁵⁰ Robert Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 222.

⁵¹ Gayle M. Seymour, 'Simeon Solomon and the biblical construction of marginal identity in Victorian England', *Journal of Homosexuality* 33 (1997), pp. 97-119, p. 116.

⁵² Colin Cruise, *Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Merrell, 2005), p. 61.

that he was about to join the Roman Catholic communion, and certainly the Roman ritual had always had a great attraction for him. The daily sacrifice, more awful really than the sacrifices of the ancient world, stirred him as much by its superb rejection of the evidence of the senses as by the primitive simplicity of its elements and the eternal pathos of the human tragedy that it sought to symbolize. He loved to kneel down on the cold marble pavement and watch the priest, in his stiff flowered dalmatic, slowly and with white hands moving aside the veil of the tabernacle, or raising aloft the jewelled lantern-shaped monstrance [note this is the shape depicted by Solomon] with that pallid wafer that at times, one would fain think, is indeed the *panis caelestis*, the bread of angels.⁵³

But Dorian Gray is a story about ugliness as well as beauty, of the spirit as well as the body; about delight, but also about self-disgust. It is this that helps us to begin to understand what Colin Cruise has referred to as Solomon's 'obscure symbolism, sometimes personal'.⁵⁴ In his prose poem, *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep*, privately printed in 1871, the narrator saw:

the form of one stood before me, unclothed, save for a fillet binding his head, whereof the ends lay on either side of his neck; also upon his left shoulder hung a narrow vestment; in his right hand he bore a branch of dark foliage... I knew that my Soul stood by me.⁵⁵

Now, whilst Solomon intended the whole image of *Sacramentum Amoris* to represent the highest form of love, he wrote of the 'figure, especially the Sacrament, being glowing against a dull background'. The Sacrament itself is the winged figure in the monstrance. In *A Vision of Love* the narrator sees the figure of

⁵³ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (New Lanark: Geddes and Grosset, 2001), p. 37.

⁵⁴ Cruise, *Love Revealed*, p. 60.

⁵⁵ Simeon Solomon, *A Vision of Love Revealed in Sleep* (London: F. S. Ellis, 1871), p. 2.

Love, who is winged.⁵⁶ Moreover, finally he apprehends a figure 'the Very Love, the Divine Type of Absolute Beauty, primeval and eternal, compact of the white flame of youth'.⁵⁷ The Very Love, therefore, is burning in the monstrosity, and the figure holding it aloft in both of these paintings, if we read across from the *Vision*, is Solomon's beautiful soul which, unlike Solomon, has a beautiful form and which, unlike Solomon, has no guilt at union with the body of another man.

Solomon's *Socrates and His Agathodaemon* (c.1865) appeared in the major 2001-2 *Victorian Nude* exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London. This shows an 'ugly' Socrates, with a beautiful nude youth with wings and halo, the guardian angel. Robert Upstone's catalogue entry says that the image is 'humorous' and is 'posed wittily'; this is a 'comic drawing', even if the angel has a 'slightly rueful attitude' due to Socrates' 'hard view of life and enforced suicide'.⁵⁸ However, I would suggest that the daemon's expression is a more modest version of that of the winged 'sad love' that holds the hand of a nude man who is turning away to a woman in *The Bride, Bridegroom and Sad Love*, a work of the same year.⁵⁹ Solomon himself was not a stunning physical beauty. His friend Oscar Browning said that he was 'not good looking, rather the reverse'.⁶⁰ In fact he looked rather like his image of Socrates. Solomon dreamed of the physical beauty that he did not possess and surely this was, for him, more a matter for tragedy, than laughter. But also did he not dream of having a beautiful soul?

Solomon's watercolour *Heliogabulus* of the following year, 1866, shows a slight wistful figure.⁶¹ It is very much a sanitised vision, in comparison with that given in the main ancient source for the emperor which is the late Roman *Historia Augusta*:

⁵⁶ Solomon, *Vision of Love*, p. 6.

⁵⁷ Solomon, *Vision of Love*, p. 36.

⁵⁸ Alison Smith, ed., *Exposed: the Victorian Nude* (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), cat. no. 80, p. 157. Cruise, *Love Revealed*, p. 148, also finds it 'humorous'.

⁵⁹ Smith, *Exposed*, cat no. 79, p. 156.

⁶⁰ Browning, quoted in Simon Reynolds, *The Vision of Simeon Solomon* (Stroud: Catalpa Press, 1984), p. 21.

⁶¹ Cruise, *Love Revealed*, pp. 136-7.

at Rome he did nothing but send out agents to search for those who had particularly large organs and bring them to the palace in order that he might enjoy their vigour. Moreover, he used to have the story of Paris played in his house, and he himself would take the rôle of Venus, and suddenly drop his clothing to the ground and fall naked on his knees, one hand on his breast, the other before his private parts, his buttocks projecting meanwhile and thrust back in front of his partner in depravity.⁶²

It was to be the 'gay sunshine' movement of the 1970's before such sexual gymnastics could be proclaimed to be the actions of beauty and liberation. Solomon's self-disgust led to intense efforts to create visions of romanticised beauty. It is not surprising that he, like Dorian Gray (and perhaps Heliogabulus) tried out different forms of religion for aesthetic size since none of them were precisely suited for their needs. Wilde, after his financial ruin, wrote to Alfred Douglas of his dismay at the sale of his Simeon Solomon drawings.⁶³ Perhaps they both (Wilde, and Solomon, I mean, not Bosie) came to realise that the perfect beauty of body and soul is not present here on earth – Solomon painted the dream and it was left to Wilde's creation, Dorian Gray, to stab and kill it. For these Victorian artists the dream of intimate bodily contact, taste and penetration was mired in the kind of bodily self-disgust that also valorised the Eucharist as a purificatory act of contact with the perfect body of Christ. Just like the real taste of the bread in the Mass, the reality of the flesh was the ordinary telegraph boy and not the sublime.

Solomon was depicting his fantasy, but behind the image was an agenda of legitimating homosexual tastes. Michael Hatt has commented in relation to a study of male nudes that 'the impossible object of the homoerotic gaze in nineteenth-

⁶² *Historia Augusta*, trans. David Magie Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1921), 5, 2-4; p. 115.

⁶³ Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis*, British Library Add. MSS 50141A, fol. 14r, reproduced in Oscar Wilde, *'De Profundis': A Facsimile* (London: British Library, 2000). See also Ellis Hanson, 'Oscar Wilde and the scarlet woman', *Journal of Homosexuality* 33 (1997), pp. 121-37.

century America, the inaccessible blankness, is constructed and occluded by the interpretable text of sculpture'.⁶⁴ Hatt was addressing works that, paradoxically, evoked even as they attempted to contain the homoerotic. Solomon's opponents were well aware that images are productive of desire in the viewer not just expressive of the views of the artist.⁶⁵ Koureas' contribution in this volume explores the 'transformative sublime power of vision and touch'.⁶⁶ It was by harnessing just such a power that Solomon was attempting to craft a visual language in which it would be possible to advance transformative advocacy of what was widely dismissed from the realm of the discussable as mere 'lowly sensuality'.⁶⁷

Solomon, therefore, was attempting to enter the homosocial realm of art critique in order to secure the validity of homoerotic responses and by extension homosexual behaviour as being in congruity with idealised masculinity.⁶⁸ His cultural vehicle for this was the evocation of ancient rituals of sacrality. Griffin, in his discussion of Thomas Eakins *The Swimming Hole* (c. 1883-5), comments that the nude male bathers in this painting are engaged in a 'sacred ritual. It is as though the men are engaged in the process of being cleansed and purified by their immersion in the waters of the distant past'.⁶⁹ Solomon called upon the combined resources of Greek and Christian antiquity to purify his modern tastes. But in his case, he asked too much of his audience by suggesting they not only gaze upon but taste the waters and declare them not just wholesome but sublime.

⁶⁴ Michael Hatt, "Making a man of him": masculinity and the black body in mid-nineteenth-century American sculpture', *Oxford Art Journal* 15 (1992), pp. 21-35, p. 32.

⁶⁵ Michael Hatt, 'Exposure time', review, Allen Ellenzweig, *The Homoerotic Photograph* and Emmanuel Cooper, *Fully Exposed*, *Oxford Art Journal* 17 (1994), pp. 132-7, p. 133.

⁶⁶ Current volume, 'Introduction', p. 15.

⁶⁷ Current volume, 'Introduction', p. 1.

⁶⁸ Hatt, 'Making a man', p. 24.

⁶⁹ Randall C. Griffin, 'Thomas Eakins' construction of the male body, or "men get to know each other across the space of time"', *Oxford Art Journal* 18 (1995), pp. 70-80, p. 74.