The Dynamic of Desire in André Aciman's *Call Me by Your Name*

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Abstract

This paper pursues two objectives. Its first aim is to investigate the dynamic of desire in André Aciman's Call Me by Your Name. Deploying theories of emotions, it seeks to examine various treatments of desire in the novel. As shown in the development of the relationship between Elio and Oliver, their desires are contained, expanded, and compartmentalized throughout the course of the novel. The second objective is to explicate how Aciman's treatment of desire can eventually create an affecting reading experience for his readers.

Keywords: *Call Me by Your Name*, André Aciman, Gay literature

Introduction: Aciman as a novelist

André Aciman has been praised by critics for his perspicacious insight into and understanding of the human psyche. His first novel, *Call Me by Your Name*, has garnered critical acclaim for its well-crafted narrative that invites readers to explore different nuances of desire and longing that a person in love can harbor. Aciman's success in executing such affecting storytelling partially lies in his own creative penchant. Advocating the reading of classical literature as opposed to contemporary novels, the novelist does not shy away from voicing his dislike for realism, which he deems symptomatic of contemporary fiction:

> But I'm not interested in information. I want to be enchanted. I want to be taken into something that is me through you. I want you to take me to things that I want to know about myself. Giving me the history of a family in Minnesota where the mother is this and the father is that and one of the children is retarded, et cetera, et cetera, the father is about to have cancer or be fired from his job — I couldn't care less! It's all stuff that I don't even want to spend a minute reading. (Reese, 2013)

For Aciman, a novel should not merely show; it must also "enchant." His narrative style, which displays its Proustian legacy, often focuses on exploring the characters' consciousness:

> I think that we don't really read for the story; we read in order to encounter a consciousness that is aware of the human tragedy. Our lives are fundamentally tragic. There's a lot of pain. That's what I want to encounter. I don't want to hear the details, I want to hear the treatment of the details. I want to be taken to a place where you take that tragedy and make it into an aesthetic experience. (Reese, 2013)

For Aciman, the raison d'être of any creative literary enterprise should be to aesthetically reveal how human consciousness works. In lieu of exacting but lackluster elucidation of setting, character backgrounds and other details, Aciman's pensive narratives are devoted to delineating the emotional intensity felt by his characters. His first novel, *Call Me by Your Name*, attests to this artistic penchant and the author's skill in translating those experiences into words.

The novel itself may not heavily focus on queer politics as commonly expected of novels featuring gay protagonists[1]. Set in the 1980s, the story revolves around the blossoming relationship between Elio and Oliver. The former is a seventeen-year-old boy and the narrator of the story while the latter is a twenty-four-year-old American Ph.D. student who comes to Italy for a six-week summer stay at Elio's parents' house. In the first half of the book, the narrative focuses on Elio's fervent obsession with his guest, his efforts to rationalize and suppress his desire, and his evaluation of Oliver's distant yet sometimes suggestive comportment. After much hesitation, Elio decides to admit to the feelings he has towards Oliver and discovers that Oliver also feels attracted to him. Initially, Oliver tells Elio that he cannot reciprocate Elio's feelings in spite of admitting that he too has been trying very hard to control himself. He says that he wants "to be good" and does not want to "ruin" Elio. Still, Oliver finally gives in to his feelings. The romance between the two men is followed by various incidents of physical intimacy, which strengthen the connection between them. However, their blissful summer comes to an end. After their short trip to Rome, Oliver goes back to the United States, becomes a professor, and gets married. Many years later the two men meet again. Elio reveals that his feelings for Oliver have never gone away while Oliver also implies that he has never forgotten Elio either. Still, the old flame is not rekindled and the novel ends with Elio's statement indicating his undying feelings for Oliver.

The plot of the novel may sound simple, yet one of the plaudits the novel has earned is that this book testifies to Aciman's skill as "an acute grammarian of desire" (Zarin, 2007). This remark suggests that Aciman does not merely know about the nature of desire itself but is also well-versed in deploying it so as to create an affecting experience to his readers. Aciman's concoction of desires and emotions associated with desiring merits close examination. Since the literature on the affective aspects of the novel is still sparse, this article will investigate the affective forces in the novel by discussing the treatments of desire in the narrative.

Literature review

Despite the novel's popularity, there is only a small number of scholarly works on *Call Me by Your Name*. Moreover, the available literature on Aciman's literary works mainly focuses on the issue of identity in conjunction with the author's background rather than the affective dimension of his works. Joyce Zonana's article, for instance, explores how the protagonist in *Harvard Square,* who also represents the author in his younger years, both rejects and comes to terms with his Levantine Jewish identity (Zonana 2016). Adam Zachary Newton (2005), on the other hand, examines Aciman's memoir through a postcolonial lens, discussing the author's *Out of Egypt* in connection with Edward Said's *Out of Place.* In *On the Mediterranean and the Nile,* Aimée Israel-Pelletier (2018) argues that, because of Aciman's outsider status as a Jewish boy growing up in Egypt, his depiction of Egypt in his memoir is imbued with ambivalence: "something about Egypt is taken on, accepted, loved, and regretted while something else is rejected, erased, elided" (Israel-Pelletier, 2018, p. 198). The focus of this article will differ from these works. Using theories of narratives and theories of emotions, this article will examine two aspects of the novel: the dynamic of the desire between Elio and Oliver and the economy of emotions that the author weaves for the affecting experience of the readers. As I will discuss later, the plot trajectory in *Call Me by Your Name* is marked by different approaches the characters employ to deal with their desire as the protagonists' feelings are contained, expanded, and compartmentalized in the entire course of the novel. In seeking to explicate different ways the characters deal with their desire as well as the affective force at play in the novel, this article should contribute to the exploration and discussion of the aesthetic elements in Aciman's works.

Discussion

"Are you saying what I think you are saying?": Containing desire

To desire generally means to want something. However, this seemingly simple concept proves to be a rich subject of scrutiny in many academic disciplines. In philosophy and psychoanalysis, desire has been defined and

redefined by several scholars and theorists. To name a few, Jean-Paul Sartre (1943/1956, p. 387) defines desire as *trouble* and compares desiring consciousness to a troubled water as opposed to translucent water. Sartre's conceptualization of desire here points out that desire does not merely have an effect on our body but also affects our consciousness because it can "clog," "obstruct" or even "arrest" our consciousness (Gorton, 2008, p. 10). For Jacques Lacan (1973/1998), "man's desire is the desire of Other" (p. 235). His conceptualization of desire, which is informed by the works of Sigmund Freud, suggests that desire is closely related to subjectivity and one's relation to what the other lacks. This idea, which emphasizes the relational nature of desire itself, is also present in Lauren Berlant's work. In *Desire/Love*, Berlant (2012, p. 6) states that desire is "a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it". Berlant's explanation sheds light on the way in which desire is conceived. While it may seem that desire comes from within a subject, desire is effected externally (Berlant, 2012, p.6). It means that desire is induced by one's encounter with an object which contributes to the act of desiring. Moreover, to desire something entails the recognition and evaluation of one's relation to that affecting object. Berlant's explanation places the act of desiring in a network of affects and human interaction. One's action can induce desire, and this desire can both affect or effect another action. In this section, my analysis will center on how the two protagonists contain their desire by examining the verbal interactions between Elio and Oliver. As shown in the first part of the novel, where the two men still cannot admit their feelings, verbal communication and reticence are the means by which the two men both stir up and put at bay their longings for each other.

First of all, it is worth noting that the notion that verbal taciturnity can effect intense emotions is never absent from Aciman's works. For example, in *Out of Egypt*, his autobiographical memoir, Aciman recounts his childhood experience in Alexandria where his younger self experienced joy, pain, and alienation, living as an upper-middle class Jewish boy at a time when Egypt was rife with growing nationalistic and anti-semitic sentiments. In an episode in which there was an air raid on the city, Aciman's mother needs to call her mother to inform her that she and her son have not been harmed in the attack. However, Aciman's mother is deaf, so the boy himself must act as an interpreter relaying the message between the two women, a duty that the young Aciman is not very fond of.

> "You didn't tell her. Tell her I'm her mother and I understand," said my grandmother."
>
> I stood quietly for a moment, thinking that she had been speaking to me only.

> "You didn't tell her. Tell her I'm her mother, that I'll always understand her, that I think of her."
>
> "She thinks of you, she says," I repeated, bored and careless as when relaying messages on the telephone for my mother.
>
> "And that I'm her mother, that I understand," insisted my grandmother at the other end.
>
> I said nothing, hoping my grandmother might think I was silently mouthing the message to my mother. (Aciman, 1994, p. 166)

This episode demonstrates Aciman's awareness of the performative function of speech acts. What one thinks and what one chooses to convey, or is able to convey, create a tension and discrepancy in communication. Like the passage in his memoir, the discrepancy between utterance and thought shapes the dynamic of emotions in the flirtation between the two protagonists in *Call Me by Your Name*. The readers may not be in a mediating position like the young Aciman was in the passage; nevertheless, with the first-person narrative point of view used in the novel, the readers too are caught in an in-between position where they are cognizant of what is lost between the narrator's thoughts and his speech. They know all the messages that Elio wants to convey to Oliver, and this knowledge serves as the mechanism that shapes the reading experience of the readers.

To discuss how desire is contained, Michael Hoey's work on the narratives of desires may serve as a starting point. According to Hoey (1997, p. 90), narratives of desires are usually made up of the "Opportunity-Taking Pattern": Situation, Opportunity, Taking of Opportunity and Evaluation or Result. The act of opportunity-taking in *Call Me by Your Name* is mainly enacted with the declaration of Elio's desire for Oliver. In other words, the courtship between the two men is essentially driven by what is said and what is left unsaid, and can only culminate with Elio telling Oliver that he has feelings for him.

Because of the situation the two characters find themselves in, it is far from surprising that the first part of the novel is filled with a series of subtle exchanges between Oliver and Elio. The implicit nature of the "courtship" or flirting results from their uncertainty about their attraction towards each other. This situation creates contradictions between actions and words, a mechanism commonly found in narratives that feature clandestine romance. Elio and Oliver oscillate between being assertive and displaying restraint. Their exchanges require the other party to interpret the message with tact. Many scenes of nonverbal exchanges between the two characters do not merely demonstrate that both are equally artful and astute but also suggest the compatibility of their

characters. For instance, on an evening when Elio's father complains that his son spends too much time indoors, Oliver suggests that Elio and he go out and watch a movie together. Elio notices right away that this is far from a spontaneous and non-committal offer:

> I smiled, not at the offer, but at the double-edged maneuver. He immediately caught my smile. And having caught it, smiled back, almost in self-mockery, sensing that if he gave any sign of guessing I'd seen through his ruse he'd be confirming his guilt, but that refusing to own up to it, after I'd made clear I'd intercepted it, would indict him even more. So he smiled to confess he'd been caught but also to show he was a good enough sport to own up to it and still enjoy going to the movies together. The whole thing thrilled me. (Aciman, 2007, p. 22-23)

The dynamic of their nonverbal exchange is complex and multi-layered, yet the narrator shows that both can discern any unstated intention each other implies to the extent that there is nothing to hide. This creates tension in the narrative pattern of opportunity-taking because all the signs indicate that reciprocation is plausible, and yet neither of them takes action. Elio at one point wonders if his exchanges with Oliver will always be marked by the ping-ponging pretense of indifference: "Or would I prefer a lifetime of longing provided we both kept this little Ping-Pong game going: not knowing, not-not knowing, not-not-not knowing?" (Aciman, 2007, p. 18). Since all pretenses are futile, the air of disingenuity or the state of "not-knowing" will rest upon the constraint of the unspoken. Before they admit to their feelings towards each other, their desire is expressed through strategic non-verbal signs. Both men are aware of how facial expression, body language, or physical contact can be read and interpreted by the other. Despite many pregnant gestures, both refrain from spelling it out in words, pretending as if all of these communications do not count as romantic exchanges as long as their feelings remain unarticulated. This self-imposed verbal constraint highlights the power language plays in the structure of relationship formation in homoerotic narratives. As suggested by Keith Harvey and Celia Shalom in *Language and Desire: Encoding Sex, Romance and Intimacy*, the act of verbally encoding one's desire, which is usually intangible and fleeting, indicates one's wish to "capture" and "make sense of" one's own desire (Harvey & Shalom, 1997, p. 1). This conceptualization resonates with the evasive game the two characters are playing as there is disparity between one's feeling and one's expression of feeling. To have a desire does not complete the act of desiring, not until that desire has been verbally expressed. The process of verbal expression can be double-edged for Elio and Oliver because they are afraid that encoding it verbally will also mean "making sense of it" or facing

their homosexual predilection. This idea can be seen in the scene where Elio sneaks into Oliver's room while Oliver is not there. Elio then puts on Oliver's swimsuit, and masturbates on Oliver's bed: "I put his pillow over my face, kissed it savagely, and, wrapping my legs around it, told it what I lacked the courage to tell everyone else in the world. Then I told him what I wanted. It took less than a minute…The secret was out of my body." (Aciman, 2007, p. 62). It is worth noting that Aciman deploys many words associated with verbalization to describe Elio's sexual self-gratification in this scene. Verbalization is presented in tandem with the act of unleashing one's sexual desire, and this "telling" is also equated with Elio confronting his homosexual proclivity:

> ...But what I'd spoken into his pillow revealed to me that, at least for a moment, I'd rehearsed the truth, gotten it out into the open, that I had in fact enjoyed speaking it, and if he happened to pass by at the very moment I was muttering things I wouldn't have dared speak to my own face in the mirror, I wouldn't have cared, wouldn't have minded—let him know, let him see, let him pass judgment too if he wants—just don't tell the world—even if you're the world for me right now, even if in your eyes stands a horrified, scornful world. That steely look of yours, Oliver, I'd rather die than face it once I've told you." (Aciman, 2007, p. 63)

Yet, at this point, the relationship between the two characters is still left undeveloped. Elio and Oliver still act like they normally do, and the narrative does not explicitly reveal to the readers whether Oliver finds out about Elio's entry into his bedroom or not. The impasse after this episode indicates that, however suggestive or telling their action can be, the relationship between the two men cannot develop further, if they refuse to verbally encode their desire.

In contrast to all implicit but tactful exchange between the two characters, the scene in which Elio decides to confront Oliver and tells him his feelings displays the two characters when they are most defenseless. Elio describes the moment as "the first time in my life that I spoke to an adult without planning some of what I was going to say" (Aciman, 2007, p. 72). In this scene, he is not in control of what he is going to say. This emphasizes the power language holds with regard to desire. It serves as evidence of self-restraint. However, when left uncontrolled, our speech betrays us, revealing the feelings that we are trying to conceal to no avail. This is why the scene of Elio's confession can be read as either an overdue triumph or capitulation. Elio surrenders, giving his mouth free rein to say whatever he has on his mind. Oliver, on the other hand, does not expect Elio to spell out the truth in this manner either. He even asks in an indirect way about the message that Elio is trying to convey, although it is clear from the interaction between the two characters that they know what they are talking about without explicitly saying it:

> "Yes, I know what I'm saying and you're not mistaking any of it. I'm just not very good at speaking. But you're welcome never to speak to me again."
>
> "Wait. Are you saying what I think you're saying?"
>
> "Ye-es." Now that I had spilled the beans I could take on the laid-back, mildly exasperated air with which a felon, who's surrendered to the police, confesses yet once more to yet one more police officer how he robbed the store. (Aciman, 2007, p. 73)

What is noteworthy about this particular scene is that Elio never explicitly states, "I like you" or "I have feelings for you." His message is mainly implied. Even at this climactic moment, the two characters still try to avoid putting their feelings into words. Elio admits that his verbal power is limited, yet Oliver points out that, in a way, he is making use of it.

> "I'm not wise at all. I told you, I know nothing. I know books, and I know how to string words together—it doesn't mean I know how to speak about the things that matter most to me."
>
> "But you're doing it now—in a way."
>
> "Yes, in a way—that's how I always say things: in a way." (Aciman, 2007, p. 77)

The phrase "in a way" here highlights Elio's verbal indirectness. The message is clearly sent, but the manner by which it is delivered can suggest both Elio's desperate attempt not to completely give in to his feelings and his awareness of the power of his words. Elio's confession catches Oliver off-guard, leaving him vulnerable. Despite having known Elio's feelings for him for quite some time, he is still unable to respond to Elio's confession. Oliver tells Elio that he should not tell him this because their relationship would be very wrong. Oliver's statement reminds the readers of what Oliver has said earlier about his personality: he is someone who must not be allowed free access to whatever he likes; otherwise, he will not be able to control himself. In this situation, it is Elio's words that are catalytic and will offer him the access. Although Oliver has been suppressing his desire for Elio, Elio's confession will not allow him to do it any longer. Both know that articulating the existence of one's desire can also entail expectation of reciprocation from the recipient of a message. Eventually, Oliver realizes that he cannot contain his desire any longer as does Elio.

"Call me by your name and I'll call you by mine": Expanding desire

The complexity of desire and its connection with one's subjectivity is introduced right after the intercourse between the two protagonists. After having sex, Elio at first asks himself if he is done with Oliver, now that his desire has been fulfilled. To answer this question, he also has sex with his friend, Marzia. As pointed out in his interview, Aciman states that the way a subject may regard another person is not always consistent:

> That the people you like are not the people you like all the time. Your best friends annoy you, and the people you are in love with can turn out to be unbearable sometimes... When Elio sleeps with Oliver in *Call Me by Your Name*, he wakes up and is disgusted with what happened between them, and he thinks, I don't want to have anything to do with him, how do I get rid of him. Yet, two hours later, he is in love with him again. And that's how life is; it's not the kind of thing where your attraction grows and keeps growing until it blossoms into love. Friendship, like love, is always experienced alongside the desire to break up, to be done with someone. What we nurse in our inner hearts is totally contradictory to what people claim to feel. (Moulton, 2014)

Aciman's narrative explores the nuanced feelings one may have after a successful pursuit of desire. After having sex with Oliver for the first time, Elio does not know whether he still has the same feelings for Oliver. This uncertainty however is put to an end when Oliver, aware of Elio's unstable feelings, performs oral sex on his young lover. The depiction of unstable human feelings in *Call Me by Your Name* sheds light on the fugitive and mobile quality of desire itself. There are many possibilities in how one's feelings can be developed and ramified. However, this by no means implies that the relationship between the two men is superficial. Aciman is a master of paradox. The fugacious nature of desire does not mean that love is always in a state of constant disintegration. The narrative further explores the desire of a subject by complicating the interiority of a narrator who has been enriched by romantic fulfilment. The narrator makes it clear that the consummation of their long-depressed desire has been translated into the formation of the self, which has accentuated the compatibility between the two men. The result of the intimacy long awaited by the readers does not just stop at the level of physical intimacy but also the spiritual connection between them.

In this respect, Elio's emotional fulfilment can be discussed in relation to Sara Ahmed's concept of orientation and the feeling of happiness. In *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed regards the notion of happiness as an

ontological concept. For Ahmed, happiness is not an independent feeling that emerges out of a subject. It involves associations, and happiness will arise when one "is affected by something" (Ahmed, 2010, p. 21). Therefore, in the equation of a romantic relationship, the fulfilment is usually externally induced. Still, in the respect of a homosexual relationship, the formula of happiness is not so simple. To understand the complexity of this issue, one must turn to Ahmed's earlier work which theorizes the concept of orientation from a phenomenological perspective. According to Ahmed's postulation in *Queer Phenomenology*, "Orientations involve different ways of registering the proximity of objects and others" (Ahmed, 2006, p. 3). Sexual orientation, hence, is our penchant to turn towards people of certain sexes. When put in spatial terms, being heterosexual means following a straight direction toward the other sex, which is considered by heteronormative cultures as normal, acceptable and the right tendency (Ahmed, 2006, p. 70). However, the homosexual desire in *Call Me by Your Name* is marked by an inward turn and reveals the reverse version of this heteronormative phenomenology. Elio believes that his relationship with Oliver allows him to discover the other half of himself. The inward directionality of a homosexual union turns into the discovery of self, which goes beyond coming to terms with homosexuality. While the two men are having sex for the first time, Oliver suggests to Elio that they call each other by the other person's name. At first glance, this suggestion may suggest egoism or even narcissism, but the tone of the narrative indicates that this action actually represents a transcendental connection between the two men rather than their egotistical personalities. This idiosyncratic play is reminiscent of the concept of love as completion in Plato's *Symposium*. After all, Oliver is a student of classical literature and philosophy, while Elio himself is the very well-read son of a literature professor. This little game they play reaffirms the fact that they mutually enrich the selfhood of the other.

> He [Oliver] was my secret conduit to myself—like a catalyst that allows us to become who we are, the foreign body, the pacer, the graft, the patch that sends all the right impulses, the steel pin that keeps a soldier's bone together, the other man's heart that makes us more us than we were before the transplant.-- (Aciman, 2007, p. 143)

As pointed out by Joyce Zonana, Aciman's characters are always marked by self-reflexivity. Elio and Oliver, whose names are almost anagrammatical, mirror each other with Oliver representing a freer version of Elio (Zonana, 2016, p. 37). Elio's desire for Oliver turns into a longing for existential richness. The narrative emphasizes that the inward direction of desire can be expansive and not always counterproductive as heteronormative discourses want us to believe. In other words, the narrator's take on desire undermines the heteronormative

directionality of sexual phenomenology which stresses a non-straight orientation as a perversion or deviancy.

In fact, Aciman daringly makes use of numerous forms of physical intimacy that challenge the way one registers a deviant action. In the novel's most daring scene when Oliver eats Elio's semen on the peach Elio has used for masturbation, the seemingly obscene and base sexual act becomes artfully translated into a scene of the confrontation of self:

> He shook his head. I could tell he was tasting it at that very instant. Something that was mine was in his mouth, more his than mine now. I don't know what happened to me at that moment as I kept staring at him, but suddenly I had a fierce urge to cry. And rather than fight it, as with orgasm, I simply let myself go, if only to show him something equally private about me as well. I reached for him and muffled my sobs against his shoulder. I was crying because no stranger had ever been so kind or gone so far for me, even Anchise, who had cut open my foot once and sucked and spat out and sucked and spat out the scorpion's venom. I was crying because I'd never known so much gratitude and there was no other way to show it. And I was crying for the evil thoughts I'd nursed against him this morning. And for last night as well, because, for better or worse, I'd never be able to undo it, and now was as good a time as any to show him that he was right, that this wasn't easy, that fun and games had a way of skidding off course and that if we had rushed into things it was too late to step back from them now—crying because something was happening, and I had no idea what it was.
>
> "Whatever happens between us, Elio, I just want you to know. Don't ever say you didn't know." He was still chewing. In the heat of passion it would have been one thing.
>
> His words made no sense. But I knew exactly what they meant. (Aciman, 2007, p. 149-150)

This scene is a perfect example of Aciman's skill in humanely giving verisimilitude to his characters from a situation that may appear quite foreign to his audience. The combination of an intense sexual act and the delicate exploration of feeling also reinforces the strong bond the two have developed. Elio finds himself in a state of confusion and vulnerability, but the fact that Oliver can accept everything about him provides Elio with a sense of security and comfort. Both are also shown to be in tune with the other to the extent that they understand what the other is saying even though the expression of their feelings exceeds their verbal repertoire. In another scene when Elio and Oliver

are in the bathroom together, Aciman deploys the act of defecation to highlight the strong connection the two characters have. Elio asks to look at Oliver's excrement while Oliver does the same for Elio. This incident takes their relationship to a more mature level: "What I saw brought out strains of compassion, for him, for his body, for his life, which suddenly seemed so frail and vulnerable" (Aciman, 2007, p. 172). Similar to the peach scene, this particular episode attests to the author's ability to an unfamiliar action into a humane and normal expression of love and passion. The two scenes resonate well with the concept of abjection postulated by Julia Kristeva. Since bodily waste is an abject, it transports the subject into an uncomfortable zone in which identity or order is disturbed or destabilized (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). However, the abject here has no effect on the two men because their selfhood has been firmly established and stabilized through their relationship of mutual self-discovery. Both men have transgressed all physical boundaries. Their feeling at home with all aspects of the other makes them similar to couples who have been living together for a long period of time. The existential complementarity between Elio and Oliver is the basis that renders the separation of the two both tragic and emotionally affecting. With all the signs indicating that the two men complement each other very well, they still have to part. The disappointment induced by the narrative is primarily caused by the fact that a promising opportunity is wasted.

"That ration of what is from birth divinely ours": Compartmentalizing desire

The feeling of disappointment that the trajectory of the novel can effect is predicated upon the idea of wasted opportunity, which is heightened by several incidents. Elio and Oliver's trip to Rome allows the two men to leave the private space of Elio's bedroom for a public realm, and surprisingly, their relationship is not met with animosity. In addition, after their trip, it is revealed that Elio's father is aware of what is going on between his son and his charming summer resident, and he does not disapprove of it. He even admits that the relationship between Oliver and his son is very special and rare, but he also warns Elio that he should cherish the memory he shares with Oliver very much. For a short while, these incidents allow the readers to entertain the possibility that the two men can eventually end up together, yet that hope is destroyed when Oliver returns to Italy, carrying the news of his marriage. I would argue that the two men, Oliver, in particular, give up on their desire mainly because of how they choose to perceive the temporality of their romance. In simpler terms, they regard the six-week summer at Elio's residence as borrowed time, a divine refuge from reality which has no place in real time and space. Their desire for each other, hence, is cherished but kept at bay and compartmentalized. This concept of compartmentalization is related to the central metaphor of the novel: The Basilica of San Clemente. When Elio and Oliver travel around Rome

together before Oliver's departure for the US, they get the chance to go to a local bookstore in which a public recital event is being held so that a local poet can read some parts of his newly published book to his fans. Recounting the time when he spent being homesick in Thailand and his dreamy encounter with a Thai transgender woman, the poet deploys the image of the Basilica of San Clemente, which has been built, destroyed, restored and rebuilt over its old location, to suggest the fluidity and multifaceted nature of identity. However, the meaning of the metaphor can be expanded further, to represent the general circumstance of one's existence. Our consciousness inhabits the present in a nonlinear fashion. This resonates with Oliver's and Elio's views of their life later when the two men grow apart. When Oliver comes to Italy again to break the news, to Elio, of his wedding, the latter receives the news with noticeably perfunctory congratulations. Oliver's temporary visit ends with a family gathering to decide who the next summer resident will be. The narrative shows Elio's contemplation over the nature of his relationship with Oliver:

> I looked at the faces of the other applicants. This one wasn't so bad. I began to wonder what turn my life would have taken had someone else shown up instead. I wouldn't have gone to Rome. But I might have gone elsewhere. Wouldn't have known the first thing about San Clemente. But I might have discovered something else which I'd missed out on and might never know about. Wouldn't have changed, would never be who I am today, would have become someone else. (Aciman, 2007, p. 229)

Elio thinks that Oliver is just a possibility within a million others. Just as his presence in Elio's life enriches Elio's existence, so will other potential applicants in the past and those whom Elio will meet in the future. Despite its philosophical tone, the passage clearly hints at Elio's attempt at a self-consolatory rationalization. He tries to cast off Oliver by denying the intimate connection that the narrative has established earlier. In a normal coming-of-age process, Elio's gesture will lead to resignation, growth, and maturity. However, for this novel, neither Elio nor Oliver can really forget their romantic encounter. Instead of oblivion, their desire for each other is compartmentalized as either a cherished past or a parallel reality, leading to a paradoxical outcome. While this compartmentalization provides a space for both to remember and cherish always their wonderful time together, relocating their desire in a newly spatialized temporality does not merely place their own relationship in a different ontological dimension but also blocks the possibility of rekindling it. Their lingering passion for each other as shown many years later reinforces the idea of "wasted opportunity" even further. In the scene where Elio decides to visit

Oliver at his campus fifteen years after his wedding, it is clear from the passage that the two men have never forgotten what they share. Still, the fashions by which both choose to cherish their memory do differ. Elio chooses to treat his past as an antique memento sleeping in his storage:

> Over the years I'd lodged him in the permanent past, my pluperfect lover, put him on ice, stuffed him with memories and mothballs like a hunted ornament confabulating with the ghost of all my evenings. I'd dust him off from time to time and then put him back on the mantelpiece. He no longer belonged to earth or to life. (Aciman, 2007, p. 233)

Elio eventually admits to Oliver that his feelings have never gone away and that the idea of seeing his family will prove too painful to bear. He even spells out to Oliver how the two of them have lived and will live their lives: "...we'll speak about two young men who found much happiness for a few weeks and lived the remainder of their lives dipping cotton swabs into that bowl of happiness, fearing they'd use it up, without daring to drink more than a thimbleful on ritual anniversaries" (Aciman, 2007, p. 237). The image is fraught with defeatism. Desire remains but stays entrapped even though the two of them have the full potential to unlock it.

In comparison with Elio's elegiac statement, Oliver's recollection of his past is not imbued with resentment. This is clearly shown when Oliver reveals to Elio what he wrote on the back of the postcard he took from Elio's room as a memento: "*Cor cordium*, heart of hearts, I've never said anything truer in my life" (Aciman, 2007, p. 242). For Oliver, he has been living many parallel lives, and his time with Elio is described as the heart of all the hearts that he has. Despite its sweet tone, this concept of parallel lives discloses a tragic truth. The life Oliver could have had if he had chosen Elio is the one that is most valuable to him, but that life has never actually been lived. While Elio compartmentalizes his memory into the past, Oliver places it in a parallel present. Ironically, in this case, the present bespeaks an escapist sentiment rather than simple nostalgia. Its contemporaneous temporality suggests that Oliver may not be able to divorce himself from it. The escapist nature of Oliver's take on their romance is also emphasized when he compares the two men's reunion to his waking up from a twenty-year coma. Being comatose usually connotes entrapment. Oliver's current life is merely an evasion of a more real reality. Although Aciman seems to treat the idea that our consciousness always inhabits time and space in a variegated non-linear fashion as a normal possibility, the comparison made by Oliver shows that living such a parallel life is sometimes tantamount to defeat. His current situation is a numb slumber from which he should awaken. This use of euphemism to conceal the painful truth resonates with the wisdom given to

Elio by his father, who warns his son that one should not run away from pain. The time will come when even the memory of Oliver will hurt Elio. However, the inevitable pain must not be shunned: "In your place, if there is pain, nurse it, and if there is a flame, don't snuff it out, don't be brutal with it. Withdrawal can be a terrible thing when it keeps us awake at night, and watching others forget us sooner than we'd want to be forgotten is no better" (Aciman, 2007, p. 224). The father does not think that running away from regret is the path his son should embark upon. He must confront and live with the pain and avoid desensitizing himself to experiences that can hurt him. This could be the reason why Elio decides to call a spade a spade when hearing Oliver's escapist view on his life. For Elio, the idea of living a parallel life leads to nothing but a pusillanimous denial of unfulfilled desire, regret and an inability to confront what one has missed out on:

> …We missed out on so much. It was a coma. Tomorrow I go back to my coma, and you to yours. Pardon, I didn't mean to offend—I am sure yours is no coma."
>
> "No, a parallel life."
>
> Maybe every other sorrow I'd known in life suddenly decided to converge on this very one. I had to fight it off. And if he didn't see, it's probably because he himself was not immune to it. (Aciman, 2007, p. 241)

The passage highlights the tragic condition of the two men because it touches upon the painful truth which Oliver has been trying to deny; it is practically impossible to live a parallel life. Oliver's intention to have his son revisit Elio's residence when he grows up sheds light on Oliver's juvenile belief that living vicariously can be equated with real living. However, living a parallel life can by no means fill the void that has been left gaping since their separation. The description of Elio's feelings converging on him at this moment accentuates the impossibility of living simultaneously in two existential modes. No matter how one tries to shun regret or sorrow, no matter how much one represses those feelings into the past, they will always resurface and emerge to the present.

> Before Elio says goodbye to Oliver, he contemplates the possibility that the two will rekindle the old flame. Elio realizes that they have reached the point of no return; Oliver has a family of his own, and it is impossible for him to leave them. Elio's reflection ends with the heartbreaking note in which Elio describes how he has chosen to remember the blissful six weeks he spent with Oliver.

> In the weeks we'd been thrown together that summer, our lives had scarcely touched, but we had crossed to the other bank, where time stops and heaven reaches down to earth and gives us that ration of what is from birth divinely ours. We looked the other way. We spoke about everything but. But we've always known, and not saying anything now confirmed it all the more. We had found the stars, you and I. And this is given once only. (Aciman, 2007, p. 243-244)

Elio eventually resorts to the compartmentalization of his desire by placing it in the past since redeeming it is beyond possibility. Nevertheless, this past assumes an even more special temporality. It is a divine time that their fate gracefully allocates and endows to the two men. Taking the advice offered by Elio's father into account, one can argue that Elio's approach to the compartmentalization of desire is more grounded in reality than Oliver's, making him more mature. Some years later when Oliver visits Elio again, Elio takes Oliver to his father's grave, calling his father's burial place a ghost spot. When Oliver asks Elio whether Elio will give him a ghost spot too, Elio thinks to himself that Oliver's presence will always be present in every space of his home, but he decides not to tell him that. Instead, he points to his old room where Oliver used to stay when he was a resident at the house (Aciman, 2007, p. 247). This gesture represents well Elio's method of compartmentalization, which differs greatly from Oliver's. Elio's feelings remain the same, yet what belongs to the past, Oliver's presence in his life in particular, needs to be placed into the past.

The ending of the novel seems to offer closure for the romantic journey of these two men. However, Aciman still manages artfully to push the limits of desire between the two characters for the last time as desire resurfaces on the last page of the novel:

> Twenty years was yesterday, and yesterday was just earlier this morning, and morning seemed light-years away.
>
> "I'm like you," he [Oliver] said. "I remember everything."
>
> I stopped for a second. If you remember everything, I wanted to say, and if you are really like me, then before you leave tomorrow, or when you're just ready to shut the door of the taxi and have already said goodbye to everyone else and there's not a thing left to say in this life, then, just this once, turn to me, even in jest, or as an afterthought, which would have meant everything to me when we were together, and, as you did back then, look me in the face, hold my gaze, and call me by your name. (Aciman, 2007, p. 248)

Oliver's statement makes it impossible for Elio to discount the possibility of their reunion in the future. Instead of saying "Like you, I remember everything," the syntax of Oliver's statement, in which the two clauses are separated, broadens the scope of the similarities between them. "I'm like you" implies that the past memory is probably not the only thing that they have in common. This leaves Elio pondering over the extent to which he and Oliver are similar. If Oliver is really like him, Elio's presence too must inhabit every single part of his life, becoming a fire that is difficult to extinguish. This denies Elio the opportunity to give up on his feelings for Oliver. The last sentence of the novel ends with an emotionally charged tone, asserting the impossibility of an absolute compartmentalization of desire. Elio's state of mind reverts to his younger years where he yearns for Oliver to reciprocate both his feelings and his existence. Desire is revealed to be an ever-moving force that one cannot control. In fact, the last section of the novel does not merely give hope to Elio but also to the readers. It starts where the story begins; loaded taciturnity, the possibility of romance, and uncontrollable desire. As Stacey D'Erasmo points out in her review of the novel, the ending makes the readers unable to give up their hope for the possibility of the two men's reunion in the future:

> Elio and Oliver might give each other up, but the book that conjures them doesn't give up either one. In fact, it brings them back together, reunites them, for a glorious endless summer. In the book, the river can be revisited. The closing words echo the title: a phrase simultaneously of elegy and of invitation. (D'Erasmo, 2007)

Just when readers are going to give up, a glimmer of hope again presents itself. The indeterminate ending both emphasizes Elio's reignited desire and invites the readers not to let go off the two characters. From the ending of novel onwards, anything can happen. Even the reference to time in the last chapter of the novel itself contributes to this affective manipulation. While the whole narrative throughout the story is presented in retrospect, and Oliver and Elio still regard their blissful summer together as time long gone, the last passage of the novel starts with a pregnant time adverb: "last summer, he finally did come back" (Aciman, 2007, p. 244). For the first time, the narrative breaks away from its completely retrospective mode of narration. Even though the adverb of time refers to a point in the past, the word "last" also frames and places the narrator in the present in which the future has not yet unfolded. It is a masterful ending where the author can weave the desire of both his readers and Elio together, reminding them that desire, hope, and wishes are always part of human life. As a result, Elio's pursuit of love can still continue even if the novel has already reached its final page.

Notes

1. For more information on queer politics, see “Sex, Political Economy, Citizenship: The Formation of Queer Theory in the U.S.” by Pawin Malaiwong (2012)

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