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# Repression/Incitement: Double-Reading Vita Sackville-West's *The Edwardians* Through Freud and Foucault

Aimee Elizabeth Coley

University of South Florida, [aimeecoley@yahoo.com](mailto:aimeecoley@yahoo.com)

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Repression/Incitement:

Double-reading Vita Sackville-West's *The Edwardians* through Freud and Foucault

by

Aimee Coley

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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Major Professor: Elizabeth Hirsh, Ph.D.  
Tova Cooper, Ph.D.  
Susan Mooney, Ph.D.

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### Abstract

Vita Sackville-West's autobiographical novel *The Edwardians* lends itself to a double reading: both Freudian and Foucauldian. The Freudian conflict between desire and prohibition plays out in the unresolved Oedipus complex of its protagonist Sebastian, son of the Duchess of Chevron; repression drives Sebastian's behavior in all his relationships. The novel also depicts an upper-class Edwardian society incited to discourse in a Foucauldian sense—a society in which sexual gossip functions as a discourse of power. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this incitement is produced by repression, and functions as a symptom of it. The relationship between repression and incitement suggests the possibility of a theoretical rapprochement between Freud and Foucault.

**Preface:**

**Psychoanalysis and *The Edwardians***

Critics commonly consider Vita Sackville-West's life and work in relation to Virginia Woolf, usually by examining the ways in which the two women profoundly shaped each other's lives, both personally and professionally.<sup>1</sup> Yet our understanding of Woolf as a writer of searing psychological insights sometimes overshadows the possibility that Sackville-West may have contributed valuable insights as well. Over the last decade, however, critics have become more willing to analyze Sackville-West on her own terms, distinct from the often overpowering literary presence of her relationship with Woolf.<sup>2</sup> Despite this development, *The Edwardians* (1930)--Sackville-West's most commercially successful novel and a popular bestseller at the time of its publication--continues to receive scant critical attention. Although *The Edwardians* has been analyzed briefly in the context of broader critical studies,<sup>3</sup> only one published piece focuses solely on the novel: Sophie Blanch's "Contested Wills: Reclaiming the Daughter's Inheritance

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<sup>1</sup> For recent examples which focus primarily on the relationship between Sackville-West and Woolf, see Kirstie Blair, Rosi Braidotti, Louise DeSalvo, Karen Kaivola, Elizabeth Meese, Suzanne Raitt, Victoria Smith, Karen Sproles, Joanne Trautmann, Janine Utell, and McKenzie Zeiss. For analyses of the relationship within the context of Sackville-West's life specifically, see Victoria Glendinning, Nigel Nicolson, and Michael Stevens.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ian Blyth, Yvonne Ivory, Georgia Johnston, and Rebecca Nagel.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Glendinning, Raitt, and Stevens.

in Vita Sackville-West's *The Edwardians*."<sup>4</sup> We may then ask why *The Edwardians* has not received more critical attention. More specifically, as a novel published when both British literary modernism and psychoanalysis were powerfully influential, *The Edwardians* might be expected to attract more psychoanalytically-oriented criticism.

Especially because of its central concern with rendering characters' subjectivity through repression, I read *The Edwardians* as a novel situated at the intersection of modernism and psychoanalysis. Proceeding from the assumption that Sackville-West's work was inevitably influenced by the cultural milieu in which she participated, I propose to analyze the novel from a Freudian perspective. Despite the absence of explicit references to psychoanalysis in Sackville-West's corpus, I try to show how the psychoanalytic context that has been neglected in most critical studies of her work can offer insight into the themes and methods of her narrative.

One reason for this critical silence might be that Sackville-West's own opinions about psychoanalysis are difficult to gauge. There is no evidence that she read Freud, although she did own a copy of the first volume of sexologist Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (1915), as well as Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* (1908), a utopian treatise on pacifism and same-sex love (Glendinning 405).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, like Freud, Ellis, and Carpenter, Sackville-West, in her fiction, "focuses on presenting the self in terms of

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<sup>4</sup> An early piece of brief criticism analyzes *The Edwardians* alongside Rose Macaulay's *Told by an Idiot*: W. R. Irwin's "Permanence and Change in *The Edwardians* and *Told by an Idiot*."

<sup>5</sup> Glendinning further describes inscriptions and notes within these books: "In the volume *Sexual Inversion* Harold had inscribed a quotation from Verlaine, '*On est fier quelquefois quand on se compare.*' There is Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex*, and Otto Weininger's *Sex and Character*, with 'V.N. Polperro 1918' on the flyleaf, and passages about male and female characteristics heavily annotated. 'When [women] marry they give up their own name and assume that of their husband without any sense of loss' wrote Weininger. 'I disagree,' scrawled Vita in the margin'" (405).

sexuality” (Johnston 127). Given her concern with the connection between subjectivity and sexuality, her silence about psychoanalysis is striking. Her (close) relationship with Woolf and (antagonistic) relation with Bloomsbury would have made her aware of psychoanalysis in a general way, and she would likely have known about Virginia’s ambivalence toward psychoanalysis: the Hogarth Press which Woolf operated with her husband Leonard published James and Alix Strachey’s English translations of Freud, yet it is widely believed that Virginia “was openly hostile to [psychoanalysis], at least as an adjunct to literature, if not so much as an approach to understanding character” (Frosh 128). But where Woolf eventually registered her interest in psychoanalysis explicitly (in *Three Guineas* and “A Sketch of the Past,” for example) Sackville-West never did so.<sup>6</sup>

Sackville-West’s lack of overt engagement with psychoanalysis was perhaps symptomatic of her distance from literary modernism itself. Stephen Frosh observes that “one of the claims one might make about the relationship between psychoanalysis and modernism is that each is a beast of the other . . . modernist perceptions of subjectivity, individuality, memory, and sociality are all deeply entwined with psychoanalytic sensitivity” (Frosh 116). Sackville-West’s critics and biographers seldom detect such perceptions in her work. For example, in *The Edwardians*, *All Passion Spent*, and *Family History*, Michael Stevens finds “little trace of introspection or of hidden depths” (111), singling out *The Edwardians* for its “empty” characters: “her portrayal of the aristocracy . . . lacks the depth and rotundity which would have made the characters in the book come truly alive, but this, surely, is partly intentional—the emptiness of the characters is

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<sup>6</sup> For a thorough analysis of Woolf’s complex engagement with psychoanalysis, see Elizabeth Abel’s *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis*.

heavily stressed—and partly because they are caricatures, at least to some extent” (115). Similarly, it is widely held that as a novelist Sackville-West relied on traditional narrative forms,<sup>7</sup> eschewing the formal experiments favored by iconic modernists like Woolf, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot.

However, Suzanne Raitt’s study of Sackville-West and Woolf advances a different view. For Raitt, the characters in *The Edwardians* do exhibit psychological depth. Noting that the names of siblings Sebastian and Viola allude to Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, Raitt sees the novel encoding “complexities of gender” (like *Twelfth Night*) which subvert its overtly heterosexual narrative (104). Raitt focuses primarily on the queering of the relationship between Sebastian and the non-aristocratic adventurer and daredevil Leonard Anquetil, arguing that Sackville-West’s narrative form is both more experimental and more psychological than it first seems. I suggest, in addition, that the psychological concerns of *The Edwardians* inhere in the way the novel translates personal events of Sackville-West’s life into fiction. The novel was published shortly after *Orlando* (1928), Woolf’s mock-biography of Sackville-West, famously described as “the longest and most charming love letter in English literature” (Nicolson 202). It is a critical commonplace that *Orlando* was written to compensate Sackville-West for the loss of her ancestral home, Knole<sup>8</sup>, which she as a woman was prohibited by law from inheriting. *The Edwardians* responds to *Orlando*, registering Sackville-West’s grief at

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<sup>7</sup> Virginia Woolf characterized Sackville-West, in her writing, as a “natural traditionalist” (*Letters* 213). Glendinning asserts that “Virginia Woolf never thought of Vita as a great writer” (141); Raitt echoes this claim in her allusion to Woolf’s “private disparagement of Sackville-West’s writing” (3). Nagel says Sackville-West’s “style was completely at odds with the fashionable modernists” (2). Sproles calls her a “formally traditional and popular writer” (18).

<sup>8</sup> See *Orlando* in Mark Hussey’s *Virginia Woolf A to Z*.



losing Knole but also the way gender shaped her destiny more broadly. Karen Sproles suggests that “the realization that her sex prevented her from inheriting Knole was the founding trauma of Sackville-West’s life” (43), and the pain of this realization reverberates in her response to *Orlando*. Sackville-West’s son Nigel Nicolson reports that his mother “loved” the book:

Naturally she was flattered, but more than that, the novel identified her with Knole for ever. Virginia by her genius had provided Vita with a unique consolation for having been born a girl, for exclusion from her inheritance, for her father’s death earlier that year. The book, for her, was not simply a brilliant masque or pageant. It was a memorial mass.  
(208)

Just as writing *The Edwardians* may be seen as Sackville-West’s attempt at self-recovery, so in the novel we see characters working through their experience as subjects irrevocably shaped by the conflict between desire and prohibition.

The novel’s plot reveals how the characters negotiate the “code” of upper class Edwardian society, which sets forth that they may have as many illicit affairs as they desire, as long as they don’t allow themselves to become the center of scandal, thereby highlighting the tension between the search for sexual fulfillment (desire) and the fear of public humiliation (prohibition). While this conflict is evident in the lives of many of the characters, the novel’s primary focus is on Sebastian, a young duke in the last years of the Edwardian era. The conflict between desire and prohibition is apparent in his relationships with his many lovers, most especially with two married women, Sylvia and Teresa. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this conflict also carries over into Sebastian’s

relationships with his mother and with the mysterious Leonard Anquetil. Each of these characters participates in the family romance, where the interconnection between self and sexuality begins, and where the conflict between desire and prohibition is most urgently felt. I propose that for Sebastian, this conflict, entrenched through repression, becomes the underlying motivation for his sexual behavior.

Admittedly, if *The Edwardians* is to some degree a psychoanalytic novel, it is ambivalently so, because it is not only concerned with individual repression; it is also concerned with broader strategies of power, which circulate through an incitement to discourse, specifically in the form of gossip about sexual affairs. By drawing on Michel Foucault's influential critical reading of "the repressive hypothesis" and of psychoanalytic conceptions of power and the self in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, I will also read *The Edwardians* as a novel that anticipates interrogations of the repressive hypothesis, and sets that questioning against the psychoanalytic vision of the self.

My aim in this study, therefore, is twofold: enlisting both Freud and Foucault in my project, I first produce two readings of the novel that are divergent and complementary, and I then attempt to effect a rapprochement between the two theorists by placing their respective insights into dialogue.

## Part One:

### Repression: Reading *The Edwardians* through Freud

The theory of the Oedipus complex that became the cornerstone of Freud's theory of the subject during the late teens and twenties is inseparable from the function of repression, which he first theorized years earlier. Freud's 1915 essay "Repression" distinguishes between primal repression (the constitutive splitting of the subject into consciousness and the Unconscious), repression proper, and the inevitable "return of the repressed" in dreams and symptoms. Of repression proper, Freud says that its "essence...lies simply in the function of rejecting and keeping something out of consciousness" (105). Freud later systematized his thinking about the interface of subjectivity and culture around the doctrine of the Oedipus complex, the infant subject's desire to eliminate his father in order to enjoy sole possession of his mother, which he said was resolved in the course of "normal" development by the threat of castration and the subject's consequent internalization of the law of the father embodied (Freud believed) in the universal taboo against incest. Both the originary Oedipal formation and its subsequent derivatives exert enormous power precisely *because* they fall under repression and remain unconscious, making themselves known only obliquely, through their symbolic substitutes, to the discerning gaze of the psychoanalyst. Freud's theory subverts the popular notion that the law prohibiting incest arises from disgust; rather, he protests, we would not need such an emphatic law if the desire were not so strong that its

enactment could only be prevented by stringent social control. An “inexorable prohibition of [incest] in law and custom would not be needed if there were any reliable natural barriers against the temptation,” he argues (*Introductory* 416). From the beginning, then, Freud views desire as fundamentally in conflict with socially sanctioned behavior. As he puts it, “the development of the individual seems . . . to be a product of the interaction between two urges, the urge towards happiness, which we usually call ‘egoistic’, and the urge towards union with others in the community, which we call ‘altruistic’” (*Civilization* 105). In this sense repression emerges from the Oedipal conflict between individual desire and the demands of society. Freud insists that “very intense emotional processes come into play, following the direction of the Oedipus complex or reacting against it, processes which, however, since their premises have become intolerable, must to a large extent remain apart from consciousness” (*Introductory* 418). The conflict between desire and social demands, then, provokes emotional responses which are so distressing that their premises can only be described as intolerable; as such, they must be relegated to the unconscious.

In *The Edwardians* Sackville-West’s protagonist Sebastian seems to be in the throes of a classically unresolved Oedipus complex. The plot turns on Sebastian’s numerous sexual affairs, which are never fully satisfying to him, apparently because his Oedipal neurosis manifests in his choice of lover, a phenomenon described by Freud in “A Special Type of Object Choice Made by Men.” Freud lists four criteria for this selection: the first he calls “the need for an injured third party”(the woman must already “belong” to another man [40]); second, the woman’s sexual virtue must be questionable (40-41); third, the man must “set the *highest value* upon women of this character as their

love-objects” (41-42); and finally, the man must express a desire to “rescue the beloved” from a fate in which she will “lose all hold on respectability and rapidly sink to a deplorable level” (42). While the plot of *The Edwardians* is overtly concerned with the affairs themselves, a Freudian reading suggests that Sebastian’s erotic life is driven by repression. Essentially, Sebastian moves from woman to woman, never finding what he is looking for, because, in Freud’s words,

if the love-objects chosen by [this] type are above everything mother-surrogates, then the formation of a long series of them... becomes comprehensible ...the pressing desire in the unconscious for some irreplaceable thing often resolves itself into an endless series in actuality—endless for the very reason that the satisfaction longed for is in spite of all never found in any surrogate. (“A Special Type of Object Choice Made by Men” 43-44)

Within this framework, I will first consider how repression figures into Sebastian’s relationship with his mother, before considering how it influences his sexual affairs.

Early in the novel Sebastian asserts, “since one cannot have truth, let us at least have good manners” (32), and the narrator reveals that “the thought was not original; his father had put it into his head, years ago, before he died” (32). Sebastian is nineteen at the beginning of the novel, and he was fourteen at the time of his father’s death (210). In fact, his father is conspicuously absent in a novel where his mother looms large. Perhaps the loss of his father provokes the classical Freudian seduction between mother and son; perhaps Sebastian unconsciously apprehends his father’s death as the result of his own prohibited desire to dispense with him.

The first extended interaction between Sebastian and his mother Lucy occurs when she summons him to her room while she is dressing for dinner with her guests, a process both elaborate and intimate. While Lucy dresses, she carries on an extended flirtation with Sebastian, asking him at one point, “Why are you staring at me like that, Sebastian? You make me quite shy... Bless the boy, one would think he had never watched me dress before” (37). In trying to manage some last minute details for the dinner, she tells Sebastian to send for Miss Wace, one of the servants, but instructs him to “ring the bell” rather than going to find her, because “I don’t want you to go away” (38). Her desire to be watched extends only to Sebastian; she views her daughter, Viola, as an interloper in the scene, which ends as Lucy sensually drapes herself in jewels and covers herself in powder, while teasing Sebastian: “You must choose a wife who will do credit to the jewels, Sebastian, because, of course the day will come when your mother has to give up everything to her daughter-in-law, and we shan’t like that” (41). After this comment, Lucy “flick[s] her handkerchief across Sebastian’s lips” and says, “Sulky boy! but Sylvia Roehampton says you are even more attractive when you sulk than when you are amiable, so I suppose I must believe her” (42). Lucy’s comments to Sebastian during this scene are erotically charged, and presumably this scene is merely one among many similarly seductive encounters. Yet Sebastian’s response to Lucy’s ongoing flirtation is not immediately forthcoming. Only during the next scene, at the dinner party, does Sebastian’s response become clear.

The description of Sebastian’s thoughts at dinner provides explicit evidence of his Oedipal attachment to his mother, as we are privy to his reflection that “his mother herself, whom he had so lately seen as a mask within her mirror, looked young and lovely

now, so far away down the table; for a curious instant, he imagined her no longer his mother, but his wife” (44). More implicit evidence follows when this musing is interrupted by his mother’s suitor (and his sexual rival); immediately afterward, we find “Sebastian depressed now and disgusted—for he suffered acutely from his moods” (45). His depression and disgust are provoked both by the unconscious desire for his mother, which has momentarily broken into consciousness, and by his mother’s initial seduction and subsequent rejection of him. Sebastian’s “moods whose sweeping intensity was equaled only by the rapidity of their change” (32) may therefore be seen as symptomatic of his unresolved Oedipus complex.

Evidence of Sebastian’s Oedipus complex is not limited to his emotional response; his behavior after dinner provides further support. Having endured a condescending lecture from the Italian ambassador about how “The English have no interest in women—in Woman, that is to say” (45), Sebastian finds himself in “an ill-humour; he was stung, disturbed; he was ashamed of his virginity” (46). Yet rather than resolving to find a woman his own age, he seeks out Sylvia Roehampton, his mother’s beautiful best friend, who is both married and twenty-two years older than he. Perhaps he seeks Sylvia out because, in light of his mother’s comment that Sylvia finds him attractive, he does not fear rejection from her. But, too, she is an attractive substitute for his first object choice, his mother.

As the relationship between Sebastian and Sylvia progresses over the course of the next year, Lucy participates in it by virtue of her approval, which is tempered by the strong emotions the affair provokes in her: “Lucy’s passion for her son, probably the most estimable thing about her, inevitably carried with it a certain degree of jealousy”

(98). Later we're told that Lucy "had dwelt with an almost incestuous pleasure upon the vision of her son in the role of Sylvia's lover" (316); indeed, she implores Sylvia to "send him back to me, if he becomes a nuisance" (99), strengthening the reader's suspicion that Sylvia is merely a transitory substitute for Sebastian's primary love object. In fact, Sebastian's relationship with Sylvia basically meets the four criteria set forth by Freud in his "A Special Type of Object Choice Made by Men." There exists an injured third party: Sylvia's husband, George. Second, she, like the rest of the fast aristocratic set, has had numerous discreet affairs; her sexual virtue is questionable at best. Third, Sebastian sets a high value on her, though it is unlikely he truly loves her.<sup>9</sup> And finally, as we see when George discovers their affair, Sebastian desires to "rescue" Sylvia from her husband.<sup>10</sup> Because Freud uses these four criteria to situate the "unfaithful" mother as precursor to the degraded lover, a simple enough interpretation follows that Sebastian's unresolved Oedipal attachment to his mother is what motivates him to pursue Sylvia.

Yet Sebastian's relationship with Sylvia is only the first of many affairs, a point which corresponds to Freud's assertion that a man neurotically under the sway of the Oedipus complex will pursue a series of mother-surrogates in a fruitless search for the original love object. After his relationship with Sylvia ends, Sebastian pursues Teresa, the wife of a middle class doctor. Because married, Teresa meets the first criterion. She also

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<sup>9</sup> Sebastian is troubled by the loss of Sylvia, which suggests that he sets a "high value" on her, but he is also aware that he does not love her as deeply as she loves him: "He was not broken by the loss of Sylvia, but he was made unhappy, uneasy; what worried him most was the knowledge that Sylvia was somewhere in the world, far harder hit than himself" (203).

<sup>10</sup> Upon learning that George has found out about their affair, Sebastian tells Sylvia, "But if you really care like that...tell George to go to hell; let him divorce you and come to me; we'll travel, we'll bury ourselves at Chevron; anything you like" (193). By imploring Sylvia to come away with him, Sebastian attempts to rescue her from George.



meets the second, but just barely; the text makes clear that Teresa's sexual fidelity to her husband John should not be doubted.<sup>11</sup> However, Freud argues that something as innocent as "a married woman who is not averse to flirtation" ("A Special Type" 41) is enough to arouse doubts of sexual fidelity for a man like Sebastian. Sebastian perceives Teresa as a woman who is willing to be unfaithful to her husband; he feels disbelief when Teresa refuses to have sex with him: "Sebastian...was...perplexed. Had he not spent all his life among women who had made light of such infidelities? Besides, had he not seen the adoration in Teresa's eyes?" (299). Sebastian's perception of Teresa does not correspond to the actual nature of her character, but from a Freudian perspective, perception (or phantasy) commonly overshadows reality. The faulty nature of Sebastian's perception of Teresa provides insight into his character by demonstrating his unconscious desire to fit his lovers into his mother imago.

It is more difficult, but still possible, to see how Teresa fits Freud's last two criteria. It does not seem that Sebastian sets the "highest value" on her; rather, he regards her as merely an entertaining diversion, a sexual experiment:

But he was bored; he had known too many different kinds of women and could appraise them all—women of fashion, prostitutes, dubious aspirants to social heights, fortune-hunters, sharks, toadies, and the light-mannered ladies of the stage—none of them held any more interest for him than the A.B.C.; but this pretty, silly little Teresa, who gazed at him with such puzzled admiring eyes, and who was evidently so ashamed of

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, the scene in which Teresa rejects Sebastian's sexual advances (298-304). She asserts that she will not be unfaithful to John both because she loves him and because she does not want to be socially ostracized as a result of breaking her marriage vows.

her nice vulgar sister-in-law, might amuse him for a week, and at all events she would be a new experience, a type he had never learned before. (230)

The reference to “pretty, silly little Teresa” suggests that Sebastian finds her attractive but inconsequential, a woman undeserving of his respect, and a woman upon whom he could not possibly set the highest value. The description of her “puzzled admiring eyes” points to a woman whom Sebastian feels it will be easy to exploit, both on account of her lack of intelligence and her attraction to him.

While the relationship actually lasts longer than a week, stretching through Christmas when Teresa and John visit Chevron, Sebastian’s regard for her does not seem to change or deepen. She remains for him a physical conquest: “Once or twice he had caught Teresa’s eye, and had again imagined that a certain understanding ran between them—a fallacy readily credited by any person temporarily deluded by physical desire” (275). However, he begins to “imagine” that there is something deeper between them: an understanding, perhaps even the possibility of genuine affection. The narrator claims that that this notion is a “fallacy,” but something ambiguous remains in the description of their relationship; after all, the narrator later remarks, “Looking back over his life, he saw that it took shape, and that, out of the welter, four experiments emerged. (The crowd of other women counted for nothing; they had been merely incidents; inevitable, nauseating, in retrospect, and, above all, tedious.) Only four women had made any mark on him” (316). Sebastian regards all the women that have been most important to him as “experiments” (whereas the unimportant women were just “incidents”). The text suggests

that Sebastian values Teresa much more highly than he knows; if so, then we may assume that she meets the third criteria as well.

Teresa also meets the last of Freud's four criteria, although Sebastian desires to rescue her not from a person, but from a situation: "He had tried the most fashionable society, and he had tried the middle-class, and in both his plunging spirit had got stuck in the glue of convention and hypocrisy. The conventions differed—Sylvia had not hesitated to give herself to him—but the hypocrisy remained the same" (302). Sebastian wants to rescue Teresa from the constraints of convention and hypocrisy; unfortunately for him, Teresa rejects Sebastian and his desire to rescue her, just as Sylvia rejected him previously.

We know much less about the last two of the four affairs which influence Sebastian so deeply, so it is difficult to trace how they correspond to Freud's criteria of neurotic object-choice. But in Sebastian's relationships with Sylvia and Teresa we can trace his choices back to a common source, described by Freud:

they are derived from a fixation of the infantile feelings of tenderness for the mother and represent one of the forms in which this fixation expresses itself. . . the libido has dwelt so long in its attachment to the mother, even after puberty, that the maternal characteristics remain stamped on the love-objects chosen later—so long that they all become easily recognizable mother-surrogates. ("A Special Type" 43)

Unfortunately for Sebastian, of all his relationships, we're told, "Not one of them had given him satisfaction" (316). Yet there is one that holds promise: his relationship with

Leonard Anquetil. This relationship differs from the ones he pursues with female lovers, and can be analyzed in a different psychoanalytic context.

Suzanne Raitt convincingly argues that the relationship between Sebastian and Anquetil should be interpreted in light of Sackville-West's use of the word "queer," which circulated among her friends and acquaintances at the time she was writing *The Edwardians*, to mean homosexual. If there is a homosexual attraction between Sebastian and the Frenchman, how should we understand it from a psychoanalytic perspective? Because Freud himself gave different accounts of homosexual attraction, there are several possibilities which may account for Sebastian's attraction to Anquetil. First I will explore the possibility that Sebastian's attraction to Anquetil is based on his fixation on his mother; next I will examine the more likely possibility that Anquetil represents for Sebastian a father-surrogate.

Sebastian's homoerotic attraction to Anquetil, like his attraction to his female lovers, might be seen as derived from his Oedipal attachment to his mother, resulting from "the fixation on the mother, which renders passing on to another woman difficult" ("Certain Neurotic" 158). Yet from a Freudian perspective this interpretation is complicated by Freud's description of the aetiology of homosexuality:

The typical process, already established in innumerable cases, is that a few years after the termination of puberty the young man, who until this time has been strongly fixated to his mother, turns in his course, and looks about for love-objects in whom he can rediscover himself, and whom he wishes to love as his mother loved him. The characteristic mark of this process is that usually for several years one of the 'conditions of

love' is that the male object shall be of the same age as he himself was when the change took place. ("Certain Neurotic" 157-158)<sup>12</sup>

Because Anquetil, like Sylvia, is more than twenty years older than Sebastian, he does not fit into the "typical" pattern. Still, according to Freud, homosexuality is "not infrequently" associated with "the absence of a strong father in childhood" ("Three Essays" 12n). Perhaps Sebastian's attraction to Anquetil is predicated on a paternal love object rather than a maternal one. If Sebastian's affairs with women can be understood as a search for a mother surrogate, then his attraction to Anquetil may be seen as a search for a father surrogate. This interpretation becomes more poignant in light of the fact that Sebastian's father is absent due to his death: a desire to recover the absent father in the form of Anquetil would then be particularly understandable.

In fact, only by shifting his attraction from a maternal object to a paternal object is Sebastian able to resolve his Oedipus complex. Yet Sebastian's attraction to Anquetil is also mixed with a certain amount of fear and frustration; Anquetil signifies the possibility of liberation, but Sebastian is both drawn to and frightened by that possibility.<sup>13</sup> I will first consider this dynamic in the context of Sebastian and Anquetil's conversation on the roof of Chevron.

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<sup>12</sup> For critiques of Freud's account of homosexuality, see Jonathan Dollimore's *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault*; Kenneth Lewes' *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Male Homosexuality*; and *Homosexuality and Psychoanalysis*, edited by Tim Dean and Christopher Lane.

<sup>13</sup> The shift in Sebastian's attraction between women and men is further explained by Freud's insistence that "man is an animal organism with (like others) an unmistakably bisexual disposition" (*Civilization* 61n). From a Freudian perspective, then, Sebastian's attraction to people of both genders is rooted in an inherent bisexuality. This perspective accounts for the shift in attraction due to gender; however, Sebastian's shift from a mother surrogate to a father surrogate calls for a psychological interpretation that is best understood in terms of Sebastian's equation of the father with liberation.

This discussion occurs early in the novel, and it is marked by sexual tension<sup>14</sup>: the roof's many "chimney-stacks, the battlements, and the gables" (84) set a decidedly phallic scene. Furthermore, the narrator's language establishes erotic associations: Anquetil "ardently, ardently" (84) wants Viola to leave so that he can be alone with Sebastian; "Sebastian's personality had so inspired him with romantic notions" (84); they both sit "astride" the rooftop (85); Sebastian is "enticing" Anquetil toward him; Anquetil describes Sebastian as "lying spread-eagle on the tiles" (86); Sebastian "liked Anquetil better than anyone he had ever met in his life" (93). Yet in this erotically charged moment, there is something vaguely threatening, something Anquetil tentatively characterizes as "flight and pursuit" (85). When Anquetil urges Sebastian to "come away with me" (93), Sebastian wonders if Anquetil will push him over the edge of the roof if he does not comply, a notion reflected in Sebastian's assumption that "Anquetil, in his exalted state of mind, was capable of anything" (93). Yet Sebastian does, in fact, refuse to go away with him, on the grounds that he had fallen in love with Sylvia just twenty-four hours before. In this scene, although Sebastian is attracted to Anquetil as father surrogate, his attraction to the mother surrogate is stronger because it provides a welcome relief to the threat that Anquetil represents.

However, by the end of the novel, Sebastian's romantic life has become so dissatisfying that he is desperate to escape. After his many doomed affairs with women, his reaction to Anquetil has changed, and he is finally able to embrace the liberation that

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<sup>14</sup> Here I expand on Raitt's reading of the rooftop scene as "an erotic pursuit, dangerous and exciting" (105), as well as her characterization of Anquetil as a figure of liberation.

Anquetil offers him, as we see during their conversation in the coach. The coach itself is suggestively described:

The closed-in atmosphere induced a retrospection of his more recent years. The past, both distant and immediate, became oppressive. He noticed that there was no handle on the inside of the door. So he could not get out, even if he wished! He leant forward to lower the window. It stuck. The family coach itself had entered into the conspiracy to imprison him and to deny him air. (335-36)

This description associates the oppressiveness of the coach and that of the mother's womb, in itself a discrete physical signifier of the broader family drama: Sebastian is imprisoned by the coach, just as he is metaphorically imprisoned by his inability to escape from the Oedipal influence of his mother. Another description underscores this meaning of the coach:

he was leaning forward, examining the fittings, trying the window blinds to see if they would pull—but the silk was rotten; his finger went through it—sniffing the camphor, touching the old seats, opening the flap of the pockets, turning this way and that to look out at the familiar streets slowly passing the window. He had often climbed into the coach as a little boy, enjoying the musty smell, jumping up and down to make the coach rock upon its exaggerated springs; had often been reprovved by his nurse for so doing—“Now come along, Sebastian; if you don't come along at once I'll tell her Grace—dawdling in that nasty old carriage.” (333)

Here we find that as a child Sebastian was chastised for the simple sensual pleasure he derived from playing in the coach. The sense of smell is particularly salient in this passage because it links Sebastian's immediate experience ("sniffing the camphor") with his childhood memory ("enjoying the musty smell"). This emphasis on smell also evokes the causal connection Freud makes between "the depreciation of [the] sense of smell" and the increased repression of sexual desire (*Civilization* 62n). Sebastian's sensitivity to and enjoyment of the carriage's smell therefore signifies an infantile and unconscious attraction to the forbidden body of the mother, and attraction that began in childhood and has remained with him until adulthood. Yet the sensory pleasure of smell gives way to the reality of the "old" carriage, with its "old" seats, and its "rotten" silk: the carriage is itself a site fraught with decay, and the mother's womb is a site to which Sebastian likewise cannot return.

The nurse's assertion that the coach is "nasty" marks Sebastian's enjoyment of it as "nasty" by extension; her judgment points to the carriage not just as a symbol of the womb, but as a signifier of the family drama more generally. The nurse's admonition should be understood as a source or sign of repression, for the "forbidden games" (333) in the coach of his childhood have given way to an adult contemplation which no longer delights in the coach but is repulsed and seeks escape from it. This reversal of affect is the mark of Oedipal repression. Only after riding in the coach does Sebastian become fully aware of his entrapment, and only then does he perceive Anquetil as a source of liberation rather than a threat.

In this sense Anquetil is uniquely able to restore the "family romance" to balance. When he enters into the coach with Sebastian he symbolically enters into the Oedipal



drama, and in doing so, transforms it. If the influence of the overwhelming mother had grown to unbearable proportions, then the father is symbolically restored through Anquetil, first by his engagement to Sebastian's sister, Viola, and subsequently by Sebastian's agreement to go away with him before he marries Viola. In the power of his fused roles as sexual object and paternal object, Anquetil effectively alleviates Sebastian's unresolved Oedipal complex; the last sentence of the novel reads, "The coach came to a standstill in Grosvenor Square" (349). By entering into the Oedipal drama, Anquetil has defused it; by agreeing to go away with Anquetil, Sebastian has also defused it. The mother's crippling power, signified by the coach, is destroyed—it stops, and Sebastian is finally able to leave Chevron in search of freedom and authenticity.

In this Freudian reading of *The Edwardians*, I have demonstrated how Sebastian's repression functions in service to his Oedipus complex. This repression is, in turn, the motivating force behind his many affairs with women, as well as his attraction to Anquetil. In the next section, I will explore how this repression also functions as the source of an incitement to discourse, and I will suggest that a Foucauldian approach may be used to enhance, rather than displace, a psychoanalytic interpretation of the novel.

## **Part Two:**

### **Incitement: Reading *The Edwardians* through Foucault**

In *The Edwardians*, subjectivity is constituted not just through repression, but through discourses of power which manifest primarily in gossip. Sebastian does not participate in gossip, but is inevitably produced by the discourses of sexual duty and sexual pleasure that inform the gossip, particularly because gossip functions as a strategy for ensuring the normativity of the family drama, a strategy aligned with a Freudian interpretation. By demonstrating how discourses of sexuality function in the novel, I hope to show first how characters are produced in and through them, and second how repression underlies the production of discourse. In this formulation, a Foucauldian incitement to discourse can be envisioned as working alongside Freudian repression, produced by and ultimately symptomatic of it, rather than displacing it altogether. I will proceed with this argument by first outlining Foucault's perspective, then demonstrating how the incitement to discourse functions in the novel, and finally by reframing Foucault's claims from a Freudian perspective.

Where for Freud subjectivity emerges only through repression and the splitting of consciousness and the unconscious, for Foucault modern subjectivity is an historical effect produced only in and through discourse—including, among others, the discourse of psychoanalysis. Repression and the Oedipus complex are nothing more nor less than artifacts of the psychoanalytic discourse that purports to have “discovered” them; in so

doing, psychoanalysis also functions to discipline the subject it helps to produce.

Foucault's analysis focuses in part on what he terms "the incitement to discourse" which, he contends, psychoanalysis took over from the pastoral work of the Catholic Church.

Because the incitement to discourse is easily recognized, Foucault wonders

Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment, against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed? By what spiral did we come to affirm that sex is negated? What led us to show, ostentatiously, that sex is something we hid, to say it is something we silence? (9)

For Foucault, through the incitement to discourse the psychoanalytic subject is perpetually solicited to talk about and so rediscover the supposedly hidden secret of his sexuality, just as the subject of pastoral care had once been enjoined to confess his secrets in the confessional. *The History of Sexuality* thus recontextualizes Freudian theory as but one (very prominent) example of how the production and circulation of knowledges-- legal, medical, religious, and so on—constitute the distinctly decentralized form in which power operates in the modern world.

Foucault does not privilege a discourse of sexuality over other discourses; he argues that we participate in a "multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions" (33). Still, he indicates that the discourse of sexuality merits special consideration because through it institutions like religion, psychoanalysis, and medicine produce and exercise power through the incitement to discourse, that is, the

nearly infinite task of telling—telling oneself and another, as often as possible, everything that might concern the interplay of innumerable pleasures, sensations, and thoughts which, through the body and the soul, had some affinity with sex...An imperative was established: Not only will you confess to acts contravening the law, but you will seek to transform your desire, your every desire into discourse. (20-21)

In *The Edwardians* a Foucauldian incitement to discourse is played out chiefly in the form of gossip about sexual affairs; however, this incitement functions as a symptom repression rather than a displacement.

Like a microcosm of Foucauldian disciplinary society, the characters in *The Edwardians* speak of sex all the time while simultaneously making it *the* secret. Gossip is the form the discourse of sexuality takes in the novel, especially gossip about the affair between Sebastian and Lucy. Although “Sebastian’s liaison with Lady Roehampton was notorious” (98), the gossip surrounding the affair is not confined to the members of the aristocracy: “[i]t was also the property of the Chevron servants” (102). Everyone is gossiping about the affair—but to what purpose? According to the narrator, gossip is enjoyable because “not only did it concern people one knew intimately, but one enjoyed the additional savour of belonging to the very small band of the initiated” (111). Gossip functions to include the privileged and mark the unprivileged; in doing so, it becomes a strategy for producing power. This power, in turn, circulates differently according to the knowledges with which it is associated; within the world of *The Edwardians*, the production of power-knowledge is overtly tied to the class identity of the characters.

Different strategies, with different effects, inform the discourses of the aristocracy and the servants.

For the aristocracy, gossip functions as a closed but intense circuit of specialized communication rigorously governed by an unspoken “code”: “The code was rigid. Within the closed circle of their own set, anybody might do as they pleased, but no scandal must leak out to the uninitiated. Appearances must be respected, though morals might be neglected” (100). The code asserts that while the individual pursuit of pleasure is of high value, the avoidance of public humiliation is of even higher value. Power circulates among those who know about the affair; of equal importance is the ability to gossip about the affair discreetly. For example, Lucy and Sylvia discuss the sexual relationship between Sebastian and Sylvia without ever mentioning it outright: “[m]any and long were the conferences that Lucy held with Sylvia,” the narrator notes, yet “no allusion was ever made between the friends as to Sebastian and Sylvia’s relationship” (98). Because Lucy and Sylvia are part of the “initiated,” they negotiate this discourse deftly.

Conversely, gossip about the affair marks Sylvia’s husband, George, as an outsider. He discovers the affair only after receiving a packet of love letters written by Sebastian to Sylvia, which were delivered to him anonymously. He then decides that

He must first accustom himself to several truths: that Sylvia was unfaithful to him; that she had probably been unfaithful to him before; that at least one person—the sender of the letters—knew it. (It was not until the middle of the night that it dawned upon him that probably everybody knew it, had always known it, except himself. He remembered a joke to that effect, in a Flers et Caillavet play in Paris; the audience had

laughed, and Romola Cheyne, who was with them, seeing him look puzzled, for his French was limited, has translated it for him; kind of her to bother, he had thought at the time; but now he wondered. (153-54)

The most difficult part for George is not that Sylvia was unfaithful to him, but that everyone knew about it but him; it isn't the affair itself which injures George so much as the discourse surrounding the affair, because it forces him to recognize himself as the naïve outsider. This same effect is observed as a result of the Caillavet play which George remembers; in retrospect, he finds that, while he'd thought Romola was filling him in on the joke, in reality she was hinting about his wife's affair—once again, he must acknowledge his exclusion.

The power-knowledge that informs the aristocracy's gossip is tied to the balance between the pursuit of sexual pleasure and the avoidance of public humiliation. A different set of concerns, however, informs the servants' discourse: "they brought to the consideration of the matter two entire but conflicting systems of opinion, the one learnt in youth in a home decently regardful of the moral virtues, the other acquired through years of experience in an atmosphere where self-indulgence was the natural law" (103). The servants see their role as one of discreet collusion in these indulgences, but they have their own aims, as well. For example, Mrs. Wickenden, the housekeeper, muses that "one couldn't help wishing that his Grace's fancy had lighted on a nice young lady, so they might look forward to a wedding in the chapel and eventually—though Mrs. Wickenden was far too much refined to say so—to a nursery once more at Chevron" (104). Other servants share her sentiments:

The anticipation of Sebastian's marriage and its results were constant factors at the back of the minds of all the feminine population of Chevron. Miss Wace, Mrs. Wickenden, the housemaids, the scullery-maids, the still-room maid, the launderesses, and the wives of the men-servants all looked forward secretly and lasciviously to the day when his Grace's engagement should be announced. The essential secretiveness of their anticipation did not deter them from open discussion. (202)

The gossip of the Chevron servants is overtly focused on marriage and procreation, a normative discourse of sexual duty, rather than sexual pleasure. However, pleasure is also found in gossip which breaks from the discourse of sexual duty, and suggests a violation of social codes, as when Mrs. Wickenden and her sister-in-law delight in discussing "his Grace's infatuation" (107), a topic of conversation which provides them with "the most succulent moment of the whole afternoon" (107). The pleasure of this moment arises from Mrs. Wickenden's position of power as one who knows about the affair. She and Miss Wace are superior to the other servants because they know about the sexual liaison between Sebastian and Sylvia: "Wacey and Mrs. Wickenden, certainly, were better advised, and derived a dangerous but agreeable titillation from their knowledge of Sebastian's affair with Lady Roehampton; they tasted their superiority, initiated as they were into the goings-on of the great world" (203).

Power in the world of the Chevron servants, therefore, is produced through knowledge, specifically knowledge of sexual affairs. Therefore, utmost care must necessarily be taken when choosing an appropriate gossip partner. In the case of Mrs. Wickenden, she "could make no friends in the house" (104), sometimes because of

personality clashes, but also because so many of the servants are “beneath” her (104-105). Rather, Mrs. Wickenden must only gossip with someone who possesses similarly privileged knowledge:

her sister-in-law...provided the ideal partner. Although not now of the house, she had once been of it, and had its workings at her finger-tips; moreover, she was allied through marriage and followed every event, large and small with a faithful and passionate interest; finally, her discretion in the outside world was assured. She just allowed it to be known that no secret of Chevron was hid from her; but she never went further than that. (105)

In choosing gossip partners, the servants of Chevron tend to gravitate toward someone similar in position, and similar in knowledge, to themselves: Mrs. Wickenden to her sister-in law, and the lower servants to each other.

However, the discourses of the servants and the aristocracy are not divided by a strict boundary. Instead, they circulate alongside each other, a process signified in this case by Lucy’s selection of Miss Wace as a confidante. When Lucy gossips with her, she pointedly mocks Miss Wace about her perspective on marriage and procreation:

I know you like that sort of thing. The procreation of children and all that. A wedding is nothing but an excuse for indulging in indecency under respectable guise. Oh, you needn’t look down your nose. You know perfectly well that you would like to see a nursery at Chevron full of Sebastian’s children. You know that when you come to Sebastian’s



wedding in the chapel, you will be thinking of the nursery all the time.

(201)

In this mocking, the normative discourse of sexual duty is subsumed into the discourse of “indecenty” and its association with pure pleasure, as unburdened by the duties of marriage and procreation.

The circulation of discourses among the aristocracy and the servants illustrates Foucault’s claim that “[p]ower is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (93). Power at Chevron does not emanate downward, from the aristocratic masters to the servants, but is rather produced through discourse that circulates among the two groups. Chevron is a feudal estate that depends, for its continued existence, on the birth of a male heir; therefore, the preoccupation with normative sexual behavior (in the form of marriage and procreation), as well as with transgressive sexual behavior (in the form of illicit sexual affairs) is both everpresent and crucially important, for masters and servants alike. In the world of *The Edwardians*, the incitement to discourse takes the form of a constant circulation of gossip, producing power through access to privileged sexual knowledge, separating the initiated from the uninitiated, and ensuring the normativity of the family drama.

Although these circulating discourses serve to reinforce both sexual duty and sexual pleasure, the emergence of an opposite strategy, represented by Anquetil, is also present in *The Edwardians*. To Sebastian, he signifies a discourse of freedom from marriage, procreation, and tradition; more importantly, Sebastian’s attraction to him signifies the possibility of his freedom from alliances with women generally. As Foucault observes

We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (101)

As discussed previously, the homoerotic tension between Sebastian and Anquetil is evident in the narrative; from a Foucauldian perspective, it offers a counter-strategy against heteronormativity. Yet Sebastian initially rejects the sexual knowledge Anquetil offers him, choosing instead to pursue his burgeoning affair with Sylvia. Anquetil responds to this rejection antagonistically, exclaiming that Sebastian has “a genius for the commonplace” (94), and asserting that “I hope it will be a long time before you discover the ghastly sameness which attends all such adventures” (95). Anquetil’s response to Sebastian is laden with disdain for his conventional choices.

By the end of the novel, Sebastian, weary from the dissatisfaction of his sexual affairs, has almost succumbed to the discourse of sexual duty. He resolves to marry Alice, “the dullest, nicest, and plainest girl he could find” (326), a decision that “would satisfy Society, his mother, and the ghosts of his ancestors who had stood where he was standing now” (343), but that also “symbolized defeat” (327) and “the final renunciation of his independence, the admission that he had found no way of escape” (327). Immediately after deciding to ask Alice to marry him, however, he sees Anquetil; this time, he begs Anquetil to “pull me out of it. But for you, I’m lost” (348), and accepts Anquetil’s offer to leave England together. In this instance, the discourse of sexual duty,

of heteronormativity, has been, in the words of Foucault, undermined, exposed, rendered fragile.

Foucault's assertions regarding the incitement to discourse and corollary counter-strategies provoke a reading of the novel that is consistent with a decentralized form of power production: characters in *The Edwardians* talk about sex all the time, and this rampant talk can legitimately be seen as part of the discourse of power-knowledge. However, in a Freudian reinterpretation of Foucault, this incitement to discourse may be seen as working alongside, not instead of, repression—it coexists with and is reinforced by the effects of repression. As Daniel Dervin observes, “It isn't just that the repression of sexuality does not negate its production, but that the former crucially contributes to the latter. The production of sexuality is the sign of repression” (220). Indeed, a Freudian interpretation would argue that the incitement to discourse is not just a sign, but a symptom, of repression. Take, for example, the servants gossiping about their hopes of a wedding for Sebastian:

The housemaids, scullery-maids, and launderesses chattered amongst themselves, unaware that each one of them projected herself into the position of his Grace's bride; turned over the trousseau as though it were her own; stood before the chapel alter and the white lilies in the great golden pots; imagined herself in a first-class carriage alone with Sebastian, *en route* for Spain or Egypt; lived through the intoxicating strangeness of the first night in the Paris Ritz. Any one of the housemaids, scullery-maids, or launderesses would have been sincerely and properly shocked by any suggestion of the kind. Their visions were all of a

young lady, fair, innocent, and well-bred, who, shyly yielding to his Grace's pleading, involved herself deliciously and inextricably in the consequences of her murmured "Yes." (202-203)

The servants' chatter functions, on the surface, as a discourse which privileges marriage and procreation. Yet they unconsciously project themselves into the role of Sebastian's bride, or more accurately, into the role of his lover, because the locus of desire in their projection is, in reality, one of sex, not of marriage: "the intoxicating strangeness of the first night in the Paris Ritz"; the "murmured 'Yes.'" Their gossip erupts as the manifest content of unconscious phantasy. In this sense, the discourse of marriage is merely overlaid upon unconscious sexual desire; the presence of discourse does not signal the absence of repression, but functions as a symptom of it.

This explanation holds true for Sebastian as well. By demonstrating in this section how discourses of sexuality circulate around Sebastian, I am suggesting that he is produced in and through them. Furthermore, the centrality of sexuality in Sebastian's life may be accounted for as an effect of the incitement to discourse. Yet it is also possible to reframe this Foucauldian approach by asking what produces the incitement? From a Freudian perspective, repression produces the incitement. But not only is incitement produced by repression; it also functions symptomatically, in that the sexual discourses, as well as the sexual affairs, in *The Edwardians* are compulsively and repetitively carried out. This formulation depends upon a reconsideration of Freud and Foucault's distinctive uses of the term "repression," which I will explore in the next section.

## Afterword:

### Freud with Foucault

By arguing that the incitement to discourse is not only compatible with, but necessarily reliant upon repression, I am attempting to develop a rapprochement between Freud and Foucault. Admittedly, this attempt runs counter to Foucault's own project: ostensibly a treatise on the deployment of sexuality, *The History of Sexuality* also functions as an assault on the theory of repression. Because Freud identified repression as "the corner-stone on which the whole structure of psycho-analysis rests" (*History* 16), Foucault's study may be read as an attack on psychoanalysis more generally. However, Foucault rarely addresses either Freud or psychoanalysis explicitly; his study proceeds more as an implicit (but powerful) undermining, rather than an overt argument.<sup>15</sup> When he does overtly address either Freud or psychoanalysis, his comments reflect a certain ambivalence. Early on, for example, he critiques "Freud's conformism" and "the normalizing functions of psychoanalysis" (5), but later he credits psychoanalysis with being the only institution that "rigorously opposed the political and institutional effects of the perversion-heredity-degenerescence system" (119). Despite its paucity of consistent or overt references to psychoanalysis, *The History of Sexuality* proceeds as a fierce critique, if not an outright attack.

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<sup>15</sup> Here I echo Joel Whitebook, who observes that "while the intended object of the critique of the repressive hypothesis is clearly Freud, psychoanalytic texts are rarely discussed and Freud is hardly mentioned by name" (52), prompting him to describe Foucault's "attack" as "indirect and torturous" (51).

Although Foucault's use of the term "repression" pointedly focuses his critique on the discipline of psychoanalysis, there are two distinctions to be made between Freud and Foucault's uses of the term; I will categorize these distinctions as "definitions" and "functions," or more simply, what repression "is" and what repression "does." Freud and Foucault employed the term in significantly different ways in the context of these two categories.

### *Definitions*

Foucault equates repression with non-productivity, silence, and censorship (17). He observes that the "characteristic features" (4) of repression are commonly understood "as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (4). Because Foucault thoroughly aligns the term with silence, what he calls repression would be more accurately labeled societal impositions or restrictions, or more simply, censorship (exercised through both social prohibition and law). Foucault's definition does not account for the nuances of the psychoanalytic definition, in that repression is only superficially aligned with silence.

Freud uses the term to refer to the psychic function of relegating unacceptable desires to the unconscious, but those desires are not silenced so much as disguised: they resurface, though transformed, in the images of dreams, the production of sublimation, and the symptomology of neurosis.<sup>16</sup> Freud's definition, unlike Foucault's, points to a productive repression. By drawing on this conceptualization, repression may be regarded as an unconscious source of incitement—or to reverse this formulation: incitement is a

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<sup>16</sup> For further discussion of these processes, see Freud's *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*.

symptom of repression. This claim necessitates an elucidation of the different functions that Foucault and Freud ascribe to repression.

### *Functions*

Foucault's critique of the "repressive hypothesis" is fundamentally a critique of the notion that power functions in an oppressive, top/down manner: we are not silenced or censored (repressed, in his usage) from above; rather, we are incited and solicited by circulating discourses. We must acknowledge, he says, that in regard to sex, we are not experiencing a "massive censorship" (34), but "a regulated and polymorphous incitement to discourse" (34). In light of this reality, Foucault urges us to "abandon the hypothesis that modern industrial societies ushered in an age of increased sexual repression" (49). Central to this approach is the understanding that Foucault does not ask us to deny the existence of repression (censorship) altogether; rather, we are meant to regard it as simply an effect of discourse (27).

Alternatively, for Freud, repression functions as the foundation of subjectivity. It is precisely this function which Foucault seeks to undermine in his assertion that we demand that sex tell us "the deeply buried truth of that truth about ourselves, which we think we possess in our immediate unconscious" (69). Here Foucault clearly objects to the Freudian notion of a "buried" truth that is accessible only through an excavation of unconscious sexual desire. He asserts that "this often-stated theme, that sex is outside of discourse and that only the removing of an obstacle, the breaking of a secret, can clear the way leading to it, is precisely what needs to be examined" (34). Again, Foucault argues against the possibility of a hidden truth outside discourse; he overtly ties this discussion

to the Christian pastoral (35) but the discipline of psychoanalysis is clearly indicted as well.

### *Rapprochement*

I want to propose that Foucault's insights may be reconceptualized as compatible with, rather than adversarial to, psychoanalysis.<sup>17</sup> The logic behind his protest is indisputable: in the midst of a ceaseless incitement to discourse, how could we ever believe that we are censored? This question is at the core of Foucault's convincing argument against the model of a society characterized by a centralized production of power. However, this insight does not necessarily preclude the experience of repression as formulated by psychoanalysis. I am not, therefore, calling into question Foucault's overall project, which is to explore the relationship between power and the deployment of sexuality. Rather, I object to his conflation of censorship and repression: to render "not talking about sex" the functional definition of repression, and to subsequently argue that we cannot be repressed if we are constantly incited to participate in the discourse of sexuality, is to blur the theoretical boundaries between the concepts of repression and censorship, which should remain distinct. Even Foucault acknowledges that his equation of repression with censorship is problematic: "But in an obstinately confused way, I sometimes spoke, as though I were dealing with equivalent notions, of *repression*, and sometimes of *law*, of prohibition and censorship. Through stubbornness or neglect, I failed to consider everything that can distinguish their theoretical implications" (82). Foucault justifies his strategy by arguing that repression and censorship "both rely on a

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<sup>17</sup> Other critics have noted this potential compatibility as well. See, for example, Mauro Basaure, Teresa de Lauretis, Daniel Dervin, Suzanne Gearheart, and Joel Whitebook.



common representation of power” (83); while allowing that there are distinctions between them, he claims that their similarity is of more importance.

Conversely, I would argue that the distinctions are more important than the similarity. Desire is repressed through the internalized representative of authority (the super-ego), and this process is carried out unconsciously. Censorship, however, does not denote an unconscious process, and it also functions as an externalized, not an internalized, force. Although Freudian repression is not overtly addressed in *The History of Sexuality*, its existence, from a Foucauldian perspective, is necessarily an impossibility: if there is no subject, except as constituted through discourse, then how could there exist a repression which functions as the site of subjectivity? Foucault’s project, therefore, proceeds from the fundamental denial of the core principle underlying Freud’s entire corpus: the reality of the subject as constituted through repression.

Foucault points to the incitement to discourse as evidence for the nonexistence of Freudian repression. I want to reframe his characterization by asking what produces the incitement? What is its source? This approach is clearly anti-Foucauldian, falling in line as it does with a Freudian assumption of a subject with a “buried truth” that must be uncovered. From this perspective, the incitement to discourse is the manifest content: it is a symptom that, contrary to Foucault’s view, points to widespread sexual repression. The source of incitement, then, is repression; “talking about sex,” in the form of an incitement to discourse, is a compulsive, repetitive behavior which functions (albeit counter-intuitively) as a symptom of repressed sexuality.

Because the two theorists use the term “repression” to denote different concepts, it is possible to reconcile Foucault’s insights regarding power with Freud’s insights

regarding subjectivity. A Freudian interpretation must necessarily insist on the reality of repressed sexuality as the locus of subjectivity; however, once constituted as such, the subject may be plausibly construed as continually elaborated through the circulation of discourses of power. This approach is, in fact, exactly how I read Sebastian in *The Edwardians*: a subject forged at the site of repressed sexuality, but simultaneously incited through circulating power discourses that, in turn, ensure the normativity of the family drama—which, in itself, is the source of repression. This circular formulation represents one way of understanding the seemingly contradictory, but potentially complementary, theoretical paradigms developed by Freud and Foucault. Moreover, by showing how the incitement to discourse functions as a symptom of repression in Vita Sackville-West's *The Edwardians*, I have tried to suggest a way of reading both the novel and modern culture more generally.

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