• CHAPTER FIVE •

The Queen's Throat: Or, How to Sing

• *Embarrassment* •

I started listening to opera because the convulsive vibrato of a trained voice embarrassed me. It filled me with an uncanny discomfort that I now call pleasure. But in those dim days I didn't call it pleasure. I didn't try to imitate Carmen, Don José, or Escamillo. I didn't try to fill the room with magnificent sound. Instead, I wallowed in embarrassment; I cringed; and I silently vowed, "In shame I will find paradise."

• *Imagining the Interior* •

I can't sing. If I could sing I would not be writing this. I would not envy the singer's self-possession. Nor would I need to imagine the interior of the singer's body: throat, glottis, resonators, mask. The singer's face is called a mask, as if a voice were never capable of telling the truth.

Singers, be warned: I am not accurately describing your experience. My task is more pedestrian. I am recounting myths and stories, culled from forgotten manuals. The search started at a book barn: I found a rain-warped copy of Millie Ryan's *What Every Singer Should Know,* and though the author warns that "singing is an art which cannot be taught from book or correspondence," I tried to learn it,

and have failed, and am secretly glad to have failed, for if I'd succeeded in demystifying voice, I would have no god left.

In Western metaphysics, the spoken or sung word has more authority than the written word. Voice accords presence—a myth that remains compelling, even though we are supposed to know better: we believe that no one can steal a voice, that no two voices are exactly alike, that finding a voice will set a body free, and that anyone can sing. This conviction that having a voice means having an identity is a cultural myth, just as sex is human nature but also a myth.

The physiology of opera singing is a set of metaphors; when we hear an opera, we are listening not only to the libretto and to the music, but to a story about the body, and the story of a journey: the voyage of "voice," traveling out from hiddenness into the world. This fable, so ingrained we do not remark it, is also the story of sexuality. Just as breath surges out through the voice box into the ambient air, so our unmarked, unformed soul loses its imaginary innocence and becomes branded for life with a gender and a sexuality.

We are unaccustomed to thinking of voice as a discourse located in history. But voice uplifts and degrades us as forcibly as sexuality does. Voice is a system equal to sexuality—as punishing, as pleasure-giving; as elective, as ineluctable.

By operatic singing, I mean the classically trained voice. It is remote from speech; it is dexterous; it strives to be strict in pitch and to obey the letter of the law; it projects; it forbids flaw. I can't give a definition of the operatic voice that will encompass Monteverdi and Wagner, lieder and oratorio, Bach and Berg. But you recognize an operatic voice. Deanna Durbin had it. Tito Gobbi had it. Conchita Supervia had it. The sophomore down the street practicing for a glee-club audition with embarrassingly sterling vocalise wants to have it. The operatic voice pretends to be polite but is secretly stressed, huge, exorbitant: it sings its training: it exclaims, "A price has been paid." You may think the operatic voice sounds like a parrot or a locomotive or a windup toy or good taste or piety or cowardice or obedience: traits we don't appreciate. Or you may agree that the operatic voice is the furious "I"-affirming blast of a body that refuses dilution or compromise.

This blast, this operatic voice, is the sound of nineteenth-century sexuality. Of all the varieties of sexuality, homosexuality is arguably the most tainted by taxonomy, and is thus the most perverse and the most "sexual"; homosexuality is one of the few survivors of that fan-

tastic penumbra of perversions that no one takes seriously anymore, such as fetishist, exhibitionist, and nymphomaniac. (Heterosexuality, too, is a category, though we often think it transcends classification.) Theories of how to produce a singing voice obliquely allude to "homosexuality"—term of travel, exoticism, charnel house, Sodom, Times Square, pathology, cure. Even if you're not queer, you live next door to homosexuality and can't prove that your property-line stops short of HOMO, syllables I sing repeatedly and truculently to exorcise their aura of taint: homohomohomo.

• *Throat* •

The throat, for gay men, is a problem and a joy: it is the zone of fellatio. Not everyone chooses fellatio: gayness doesn't depend on oral sex, and straightness includes it. But sexuality, as a symbolic system of checks and balances, measures and countermeasures, has chosen the throat as a place where gay men come into their own.

The opera queen's throat is inactive and silent while he listens; the singer's throat is queen. But the act of intense, grounded listening blows to pieces the myth that we can know precisely where an emotion or an experience begins. I am not a singer, but I have a throat, and I am using it to worship and to eat opera, to ask questions of opera so that opera might eat me.

You listen to an operatic voice or you sing with operatic tone production and thereby your throat participates in that larger, historical throat, the Ur-throat, the queen's throat, the throat-in-the-sky, the throat-in-the-mind, the voice box beneath the voice box. Homosexuality is a way of singing. I can't *be* gay, I can only *sing* it, disperse it. I can't knock on its door and demand entrance because it is not a place or a fixed location. Instead, it is a million intersections—or it is a dividing line, a membrane, like the throat, that separates the body's breathing interior from the chaotic external world.

The singer and the homosexual each appear to be a closed-off cabinet of urges. But the body that sings and the body that calls itself homosexual are not as sealed as we think. Nor are they as free. They are looseleaf rulebooks, filled with scrap-pages of inherited prohibitions: page after page of pain.

• *Manuals* •

About voice, I only know what I have read: a few bizarre books, mostly from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, written to teach the art of singing. These guidebooks codify and control the voice, and imagine it as friend and as enemy, as soul's ground and as trapdoor into netherworlds.

Like conduct books, voice manuals are full of social history. They intend to spread "culture," to civilize, and to protect secret skills from vanishing. Do the manuals have musical legitimacy? Lilli Lehmann and Enrico Caruso wrote manuals; so did a renowned castrato, Piero Francesco Tosi, in 1723. And yet I don't trust these texts to recount what actually happens inside a singer.

Like tracts against masturbation, singing manuals dictate how energy and pleasure should move through the body; they are eager to legislate conduct and to condemn mistakes; they help me imagine the voice box as a sorrowing, peculiar human capability that wants to be free and paradoxically seeks its liberation in an art of confinement.

Like many literary texts (novels of sentiment, eroticism, suspense), a voice manual exhorts and shapes the body of its reader. And the voice manual cares most about the nonsinger, the amateur, the onlooker. What gifted singer truly needs to read *How to Sing*? Only the loser turns to textbooks. Voice manuals address the aspirant who will never become a singer, and who requires a field guide to the unobtainable.

• *Singing v. Speaking* •

Opera emphasizes the gap between speaking and singing. Is there a physiological difference? Some manuals say that singing is just intensified speaking; but diva Maria Jeritza warned, "So many girls do not seem to realize that the speaking voice is actually the enemy of the singing voice." (Jeritza warns only the girls, but I assume that the boys should take note, too.)

If you speak a secret, you lose it; it becomes public. But if you sing the secret, you magically manage to keep it private, for singing is a barricade of codes.

· *Coming Out* ·

Good singing consists in opening the throat's door so the secret goods can come out. Enrico Caruso insists that "the throat is the door through which the voice must pass," and that the door must be left open lest the breath seek other channels—morally dubious detours. Many writers insist that the passageway to the human voice's resonance rooms be left open, as if singing were mostly a matter of sincerity and the willingness to confess. The throat's door must be kept open, but no one is allowed to guess that such a door exists. Know too much about the throat, and you'll fall silent.

Queers have placed trust in coming out, a process of vocalization. Coming out, we define voice as openness, self-knowledge, clarity. And yet mystery does not end when coming out begins.

· *Bel Canto, the Castrato, and the Laryngoscope* ·

In 1854, singer-teacher Manuel Garcia II (brother to divas Maria Malibran and Pauline Viardot) invented the laryngoscope. Garcia was not utterly a pioneer in this matter. In the eighteenth century, scientist Antoine Ferrein had discovered the *cordes vocales* by experimenting on a cadaver's larynx. But intrepid Garcia experimented on himself. Seeking the cause of his cracked voice, he assembled a contraption, involving a dentist's mirror, and peered into his throat to see his glottis.

With my imaginary laryngoscope, with my mirror, I am looking into the queer throat to inspect the damage.

The laryngoscope's influence may have been limited, but its invention coincided with the rise of scientific vocal methods, and the fall of the castrato, who, by 1800, had begun to disappear. (In eighteenth-century Italy, up to four thousand boys a year were castrated.) With the castrato's demise, however, came a vague fear that vocal art was declining. These fears of decadence were given a name: *bel canto*. *Bel canto* means, literally, beautiful singing; and it also implies a foreboding that beauty is in decline.

According to musicologist Philip A. Duey, the term *bel canto* acquired currency only after the era it describes had ended. The phrase itself had been loosely used for centuries, but it found its present, fixed meaning in the 1860s in Italy, and was taken up by other countries in

the 1880s; these significances only entered dictionaries after 1900.

So it appears that *bel canto* (as a discourse of nostalgia and retrospection) emerged in the 1860s. Another term was coined in the 1860s—in 1869, to be exact: "homosexual." Imagine for a moment that this is not a coincidence, and consider that *bel canto* and homosexuality might be parallel. Homosexuality and *bel canto* are not the same thing, but they had related contexts: they came wrapped in languages of control and cure. There were voice manuals long before *bel canto* and homosexuality were conceptualized; but the desire to describe the voice scientifically and to cure degeneracies of vocal art grew vehement after 1860, and produced a torrent of advice literature in the 1890s and early 1900s, including Julius Eduard Meyer's *A Treatise on the Origin of a Destructive Element in the Female Voice as Viewed from the Register Standpoint* (1895), Clara Kathleen Rogers's *My Voice and I* (1910), Charles Emerson's *Psycho-vox* (1915), and Nellie Melba's *Melba Method* (1926). Manuals of this period provide the theory and practice of "voice culture"—training and liberating the natural voice.

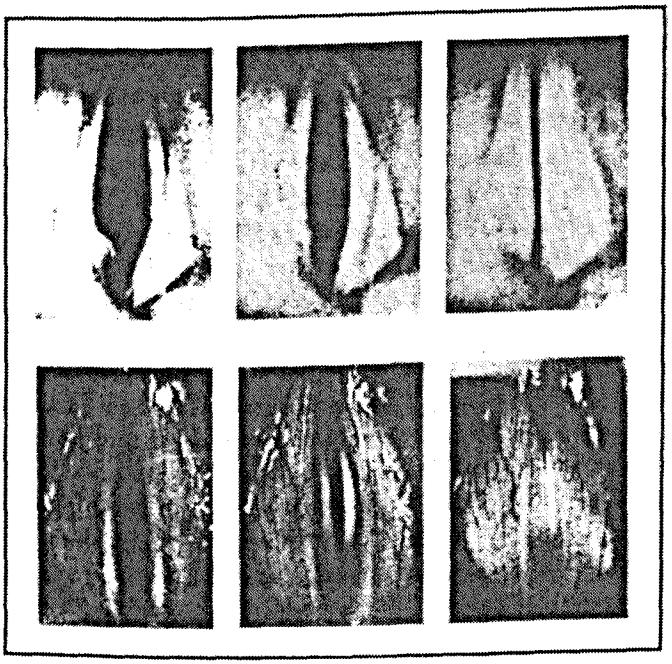
Observe voice culture's affinity with psychoanalysis. Both systems believe in expressing hidden material, confessing secrets. And both discourses take castration seriously: voice culture wants to recapture the castrato's scandalous vocal plenitude, while psychoanalysis imagines castration as identity's foundation—star player in the psyche's interminable opera.

Opera culture has always fantasized about a lost golden age of singing; accordingly, a central ambition of the voice manual is to preserve *cantabile* style against degeneration and newfangled vices. Francesco Lamperti in 1864 wrote that "it is a sad but undeniable truth that singing is to be found today in a deplorable state of decadence." (A century before, the castrato Tosi considered opera to be a decline from the "manly" church style into a "theatrical effeminate Manner.") Voice culturists long for lost days of glory, but none dares to say, "I want the castrato back!"

· *Looking into the Voice Box* ·

It is difficult to avoid noticing that the spookily genderless voice box has been clothed with a feminine aura. And it is difficult to know what to do with this information.

One major reason voice has been marked as feminine is that the



"If only I could see the glottis!"

organs of its production are hidden from view. A 1909 manual observes that the male instructor "has to teach an instrument which cannot be seen except by an expert, and cannot be touched at any time."

"If only I could see the glottis!" Manuel Garcia reportedly exclaimed, on the verge of inventing the laryngoscope. Modern scientific photographs of the singing larynx and glottis show us what Garcia might have seen: a lipped opening. Voice commentators describe the larynx as labial—based on visual analogy, and on the association between women and invisible things.

Jean Blanchet, in 1756, called the glottis "a horizontal cleft terminated by two lips." Robert Lawrence Weer, in 1948, called the vocal cords "two thick membranes," "two lips," "little shutters." But these are descriptions from outside. From inside, how does the voice box feel? Soprano Maria Jeritza compared stressful singing to "a strong rubber band being stretched out full length": divine Jeritza, thank you for precisely describing the approach to orgasm.

Though voice has been described as a duplicate of the vagina, the

wily larynx can embody male and female characteristics, or neither. Some voice manuals make the larynx seem a vestige of an extinct, versatile, genderless species. In 1739, Johann Mattheson described the glottis as a "tonguelet" shaped like the "mouth of a little watering can." Other voice manual writers describe the epiglottis as an ivy leaf, or imagine the glottis surrounded by "ring-shield" and "shield-pyramid" muscles that can stretch or slacken, as if the glottis or the epiglottis (who can keep track of the difference?) were elaborate alternatives to our dreary genitals, genitals so slimy with story, so padlocked into history, that they will offer us freedom only if we rewrite them from scratch.

• *Punishing the Throat* •

Voice culture loves, protects, and preserves the throat, but also scapegoats the insurgent throat for saying no to genital tyranny.

In the name of art, Greek tragedians slashed the backs of their throats to promote vocal projection. Diva Florence Easton commented in the 1920s that "you cannot make an omelet without breaking eggs" and you cannot make grand opera without "breaking voices." Opera pretends to dislike the broken voice but symbolically depends on it. Research into teaching the mute to speak (tuning-fork tests done on Helen Keller) illuminated the phonation and laryngeal movements of opera singers.

In lieu of injury, the singer's head and throat must vanish. Emmy Destinn said, in the 1920s, "When I sing I feel as if I have no throat." The female singer photographed in Millie Ryan's 1910 treatise, *What Every Singer Should Know,* has learned her lesson, for she has neither throat nor head: the picture stops at the neck, her head crudely cut off —as if the pose were compromising, and decapitation ensured anonymity. Without a head, she seems pure ground, deprived of mind and transcendence. As a cure for nervousness, the vocalist is encouraged to stand before an open window every morning, to take deep breaths, and to fondle her breasts and rib cage: she reminds me of Freud's Dora, a nervous case indeed, a girl whose sexual desires wandered out of control, toward women, toward the throat, and so Freud tried to shove her desires back down to the vagina, for he assumed that the vagina was the location of straightness and that movements away from heterosexuality were movements away from the genitals.

THE BREATH

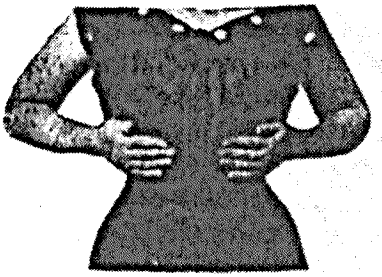


Fig. 1

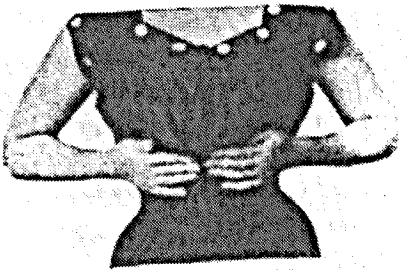


Fig. 2

Fig. 3

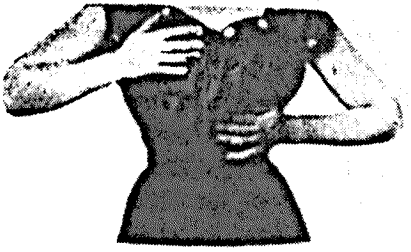


Fig. 4

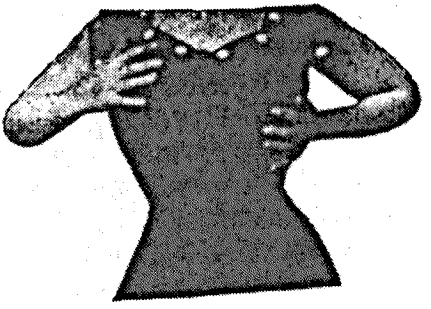


Fig 5

Go before an open window every morning, place your hands as in figure 4, inhale through the nose, (don't raise the shoulders) see that the expansion is as great under the left hand as under the right hand (as in figure 5) while holding the breath count 5 (aloud) then exhale while holding the hands in same position, repeat this exercise 5 times in succession. A positive cure for all forms of nervousness.

Without a head, she seems pure ground, deprived of mind and transcendence.

Everyone understands that genitals are mythologized, but no one mentions the doctrines clustered in our throats, in our methods of singing and speaking. We lack a vocabulary for what the throat knows and suffers—perhaps because the throat is loath to speak about itself.

From the manuals, I learn that the singing throat is feminine, that it tends to wander and break, and that it has the mercurial ability to avoid gender. And so, despite my lack of a singing voice, I identify with the throat. I love to call it home, to skip the genitals for an hour and inhabit instead the moist vocal space between my mouth and lungs.

• *Mouth* •

Recently I heard Jessye Norman live in recital. I sat in the front row. I looked into her open mouth and marveled at its self-disclosure, its size, its fearless capacity to open.

In a battered old voice manual, Herbert Witherspoon describes the mouth as a sexual organ, alive with easily excited "erective tissue," an organism containing "almost countless nerves": hence, "there is small wonder that things can go wrong very easily." Singing is *always* going wrong.

Is it unnatural to open the mouth? Composer Jules Massenet told soprano Alice Verlet, in a rehearsal of his *Manon,* "You have the ideal singer's mouth; it opens naturally!" But the mouth must not open too wide. Sir Charles Santley says that for the lips to "fulfil their office," the mouth "ought not to open more than sufficient to introduce the tip of a finger"—not even up to the knuckle. What severe regulation! Isaac Nathan in 1823 suggests that the "pretty mouths" of singers should "distend wide enough to admit a friend." The friend is not a penis but a finger: open the mouth wide enough so that "one can comfortably bring the little finger" between the teeth, writes Johann Adam Hiller in 1774. Other instruments—a spoon, a Popsicle stick—can take the finger's place. Lawrence Weer remembers his first lesson on "tongue control"; he was instructed to hold his tongue flat with a spoon while singing scales. The singer's open mouth grasps an imaginary object—sucks it, surrounds it. The object the singer sucks is space, air, blankness, hope: the cushioning condition for sound.

Voice has been described as feminine; but it is equally true that voice evades categorization. A singer wanders; a singer deviates. A

voice begins in the body's basement, a zone that no one dares to name or authorize; and the singer sends the voice (or the voice sends the singer) to an *elsewhere,* a place outside of our knowledge, a verge I won't sketch or legislate except to say that I want to live there. Singing is a movement that never coalesces long enough for us to hold it. As soon as we can remark the moment of singing, it is gone.

Voice silently avoids the categories we bring to it. Voice is willing to be thrown, to disguise its source, to hurl itself out of sex-and-gender and onto the sands of a neutral, signless shore.

· *Finding the Falsetto* ·

Falsetto seems profoundly perverse: a freakish sideshow: the place where voice goes wrong. And yet falsetto obeys the paradigm of all voice production. Falsetto is a detour, and singing always imposes detours upon a blank and neutral surge of air.

Sing falsetto, now. (Are you alone as you read this?) Fill the room with a clear feigned sound, and ask yourself what act you have committed. Then produce the sound naturally, from the chest. Which of the two tones, chest or head, do you want your neighbors to overhear?

Singing is a matter of potential embarrassments. And falsetto is among the greatest of singing shames. Using falsetto, you perform an act deemed unnatural. But nobody is unnatural around the clock; a moonlighter, I am unnatural for an hour at night but the rest of the time I am natural. Pretend, for the moment, that homosexuality, like falsetto, is not an identity but a useful pleasure with a bad reputation: pretend it is a technique, a sideline, a way to outwit a taxing vocal situation.

Codified voice production has never been happy with the falsetto: sound of mystery, unnaturalness, absence. Isaac Nathan in 1823 called it the *fourth voice* (fourth dimension, fourth sex): "it is a species of ventriloquism . . . an inward and suppressed quality of tone, that conveys the illusion of being heard at a distance." Antoine Bailleux, in 1760, warns that a voice must emerge straight from the chest "lest in passing into the head or into the nose it degenerate into falsetto by its muffledness." No one dares to claim the falsetto, to say about that high, fine, exacerbated sound, "This is mine!"

The falsetto is part of the history of effeminacy—a compelling

saga yet to be written. Long before anyone knew what a homosexual was, entire cultures knew to mock men who sang unconventionally high. Plutarch disparaged "effeminate musical tattling, mere sound without substance"; John of Salisbury discouraged "womanish affectations in the mincing of notes and sentences"; St. Raynard insisted that "it becomes men to sing with a masculine voice, and not in a feminine manner, with tinkling, or as is popularly said, with false voices to imitate theatrical wantonness." In the 1880s, after homosexuality's birth, a British physician described falsetto as a technique in which the two vocal cords push against each other "at their hinder part with such force as to stop each other's movement"; while chest tones emerge from the "natural aperture of the larynx," falsetto tones come through "an artificially diminished orifice, the chink becoming gradually smaller until there is nothing left to vibrate." Falsetto, bad news for civilization, is the decline and fall.

Though falsetto was scapegoated, and associated with degeneracy, detour, and artifice, it has long represented a resource: the castrato Tosi speaks of the feigned voice as something "of Use," particularly when it is disguised by art. If a modern voice culturist like Franklin D. Lawson in 1944 saw falsetto as a danger, causing a "white," "blatant," and "effeminate" sound in the adult male, and a "colorless, whistling hoot" in the female, the castrato Tosi considered it a treasure to be discovered by a knowing master: "Many masters put their Scholars to sing the *Contr'Alto,* not knowing how to help them to the *Falsetto,* or to avoid the Trouble of finding it." A sound at once false and useful, it may bring praise or condemnation to the singer who relies on it.

Falsetto is not a sin; the sin is breaking into it undisguisedly. Consistent falsetto, like expert drag, can give the illusion of truth. In 1782, when one "sopranist"—an uncastrated male who sang falsetto —broke accidentally into his real and robust tenor voice, Johann Samuel Petri observed that "my entire pleasure in his lovely soprano voice was utterly destroyed": a "loathsome harsh" note had interrupted the vocal masquerade, reminding listeners that the singer was a *he.*

I have always feared the falsetto: voice of the bogeyman, voice of the unregenerate fag; voice of horror and loss and castration; floating voice, vanishing voice. With a grimace I remember freak pop singer Tiny Tim tiptoeing through the tulips with his ukelele.

· *Puberty* ·

Puberty's onset: does it ruin or secure the voice? Does it destroy your life, or is it the moment your life begins?

Castration freezes the boy-voice before puberty can wreck it. But even for the uncastrated, puberty represents a moment of reckoning. When puberty hit, Caruso almost committed suicide (a headmaster wanted to profit from his prepubescent warblings); but he was rescued by a kindly baritone, who helped him place his voice. In puberty, the *real* erupts: acne, adam's apple, sperm, breasts, blood.

Diva Ernestine Schumann-Heink warns girls to postpone study until after their "physical development" is complete, and Isaac Nathan cautions males not to sing during "mutation." Only after puberty can a singer place the voice, discover where chest voice ends and head voice begins; only then can the singer balance the irreconcilable symbolic values of head and chest. The master must watch out for puberty's arrival in the student's body, and must teach the apprentice how to let the voice "pass" from one sexually allusive region into another.

Puberty can kill the choirboy's voice; but in most cases, singing begins after puberty, and so puberty casts its gruesome, enchanted shadow over all subsequent vocalizations.

· *The Registers* ·

Are registers a fact of nature, or a figment of voice culture? (It is not clear whether a register represents a zone of opportunity or of prohibition.) Some manuals say there are five registers, or one, or none. Some say men have two registers, and women three—or that each singable note is its own register.

There seem to be three bodily zones in which resonance occurs: chest, throat, and head. As the pitch ascends, the voice rises from one register to the next. The farther from the chest, the higher and falser the tone becomes, and the more one must take care to sing naturally. According to Domenico Cerone in 1613, "the chest voice is the one that is most proper and natural."

The break between registers—fancifully called "il ponticello" (the

little bridge)—is the place within one voice where the split between male and female occurs. The failure to disguise this gendered break is fatal to the art of "natural" voice production. The singer schooled in *bel canto* will avoid eruptions by disguising the register breaks and passing smoothly over them. The register line, like the color line, the gender line, or the hetero/homo line, can be crossed only if the transgressor pretends that no journey has taken place. By coming out, gays provoke seismic shudders in the System-of-the-Line, just as, by revealing the register break, a singer exposes the fault lines inside a body that pretends to be only masculine or only feminine. (Or, by coming out, do we inadvertently reaffirm the divided world?)

· *Degenerate Singing* ·

Forgetting its dependence on the feigned, voice culture overvalues the "natural." Most theorists of voice would agree with William James Henderson, who wrote in 1906 that "singing is nothing more than nature under high cultivation." As long as singing is considered natural, however, some vocal techniques will be deemed degenerate; and "degeneration" was the rhetoric used in the nineteenth century to create the "homosexual" as a pathological identity.

Homosexual-as-degenerate: I embrace and impersonate the degrading image because there is no way out of stereotype except to absorb it, to critique it by ironically assuming its vestments. I'm already clothed with the mantle of degeneration; I can't refuse it. So I say: Degenerate, c'est moi.

A. A. Pattou's *The Voice as an Instrument* (1878) offers scientific methods to remove "the defects of an unnatural voice." An opponent of slurring, Pattou strives to reform the throat, manage the larynx, and eradicate "all the faults or vices to which the human voice is subject." He even includes his own case history: ignorant of hygiene, he sang wrongly and suffered an inflammation of the throat, leading to "mental depression and general distrust of society and all its belongings." Sir Charles Santley's voice manual, too, ends with a confession: his throat grew inflamed from singing in rooms decked with imported flowers (including the homoerotic hyacinth).

Degeneration discourse in the nineteenth century was also anti-Semitic and racist. Early, I swallowed anti-Semitism: no wonder that

embarrassment flooded me when I first heard operatic plenitudes of sound. I dreaded the cantor's cry; I dreaded the expressivity of Jews, who seemed to open their bodies outward—scapegoats, hysterics, talking and talking. I remember the bad manners of the children in Hebrew school, and my fear of seeming like them. (The teacher told one garrulous, slavering, attractive brat that he had "diarrhea of the mouth.") Did I believe, as a child, that opera was a Jewish art, and that I, enjoying opera, might be coming into my own Jewishness—inherited, incurable, punishable?

Avoid excessive vibrato. Mozart criticizes a singer's vibrato as "contrary to nature." Antivibrato sentiment reached a peak in the nineteenth century (but so did vibrato itself); American laryngologist Holbrook Curtis observed in 1909 that vibrato is popular among the "Latin races," though frowned on by the Anglo-Saxons. I am not Latin but I am Jewish and I love to hear a note wobble out of control, shake and tremble until it seems our days of trim repose are at an end. . . . The trill, too, has been considered against nature or at least effeminate: voice culturist Francis Charles Maria de Rialp believes that though the trill was "very much in vogue" among nineteenth-century male singers, it should be confined to the female voice. Any affectation in singing is liable to be criticized as a symptom of degeneracy: Isaac Nathan warns in 1823 against lisping, drawling, or mouthing words so that "the singer appears dropping to the earth from the exertion."

Avoid unattractive gestures. According to Lilli Lehmann, "faces that are forever grinning or showing fish mouths are disgusting and wrong." You know the fish mouth. Singers look like freaks unless they control themselves, and this possibility of looking grotesque is immensely appealing if you choose (as I am choosing) to embrace rather than to reject a stereotypical freakishness. Many manuals recommend singing in front of a mirror to ward off fish mouth. Castrati were required to gaze in the mirror for one hour each morning while practicing; Tosi tells the singer that mirror practice will help him avoid convulsive grimacing. The singer staring in the mirror, practicing for a career, occupies a dubious, unsanctioned, pathologized position: the narcissist.

I knew Jewishness from looking in the mirror and from family sayings. I knew homosexuality from signs no mirror could catch. And yet I practiced for homosexuality as I would have practiced for a recital: slowly I memorized the notes. And I remember looking in the

bathroom full-length mirror and wondering if my body was an optical illusion.

• *Some Speculations on Voice as Economy* •

The categories "psyche" and "voice" do not simply record what naturally happens; they persuasively prescribe what *should* happen. The most important assumption about voice is that it moves upward, hydraulically, transcendentally. Like libido, voice wants out.

Voice aims to purify and to transcend; homosexuality is the dirt that singing, a detergent, must scour. In this sense, voice and homosexuality are adversaries: voice is evolutionary, homosexuality is devolutionary; voice is transcendent, homosexuality is grounded.

In its expenditures of breath, the singing body is either frugal or wasteful. Voice passes through a body as a toxin does, purgatively; to judge a voice's quality, we must ask, "Have all the poisons been flushed out?" Because voice is an essence, too fervid for storage, that escapes through whatever doors are open, falsetto is breath that took the wrong exit out of the body.

But we do wrong to place all the blame on falsetto. For there is something inherently suspicious about breath's movement from lungs to larynx to mask, something always digressive and errant about air's urge to exit the body. Though falsetto has the clearest links to homosexuality, all varieties of operatic voice are perverse. Within the logic of singing, air beguiled to a variant destination is as perverse as air that proceeds to the proper gate. Resonation *is* perversion.

Like bloodletting, singing is a drastic cure that restores internal equilibrium. John Gothard, in his *Thoughts on Singing; with Hints on the Elements of Effect and the Cultivation of Taste* (1848), opens with a case history of a neurasthenic man, afflicted with "continual sighing," who was cured by befriending young men who indulged in glee-singing. With equal optimism, Millie Ryan attests that "there is no tonic for the *nerves* equal to voice culture." Singing keeps the body, the psyche, and the moral apparatus in shape. Before training, the singer is tense, tight; afterwards, the singer unwinds.

But the unwinding is formulaic; the gestures of a singer are canned, and they are delectable because they are so easily imitated. Yvette Guilbert, in *How to Sing a Song,* offers guidelines for how to

strike poses, and she includes photographs of her own face in dramatic, comic, and pathetic attitudes that look like Hugh Welch Diamond's photographs of Victorian madwomen: she labels her various expressions Ecstasy, Neutral Amiability, Moral Pain, Serenity, Gray, Red, Purple, and Vermillion. If I imitate Guilbert and make my face Serene, Gray, or Neutrally Amiable, will I have introduced new desires, or will I have restaged the old ones? Maybe old desires, when mimicked, become new: maybe there are no new desires, and all we can do is imaginatively and wittily reinhabit the old ones.

The voice manuals hardly encourage self-invention. On the contrary, they staple the singer into family morality: in 1839, H. W. Day writes that "singing has a refining effect on the moral feelings," and Lowell Mason, in 1847, comments that singing produces "social order and happiness in a family." A good voice originates in a childhood environment free from strain, in a family where the "natural voice" is habitually used, and where there is opportunity to hear good music. (I heard good music. But I never learned how to use the natural voice. I wonder if the natural voice is a repressive fiction, meant to keep us in line.) When a voice sings sweetly and successfully, it repeats the salutary childhood scenes that fostered it, and when it moves awkwardly between registers, or sings out of tune, it exposes a cloudy, unnatural past.

Like any conduct book, whether for Renaissance courtier or modern teenager, the singing manual instructs how to secure class position, how to "shun low and disreputable company," and how to indicate refinement. Discharging sound, voice turns desire into money. And singing bodies are prized for moving up: up the staff, up the social ladder. High notes are expensive: according to Benedetto Marcello in 1720, the higher a castrato ascends, "the greater is his price and reputation."

For the singer, wealth begins in stinting and in avoiding waste: and so the singer who wants to acquire vocal gold must learn to budget, and must learn, like a thrifty housekeeper or bookkeeper, the "correct management or the mis-management of the vibratory column of air" passing from vocal cords into mouth. The singer, according to Johann Mattheson in 1739, must let out the inhaled air "not at once nor too liberally, but sparingly, little by little, being careful to hold it back and save it." Caruso tells the singer to observe a similar economy over the career's whole length: the singer should limit the voice's output "as he does the expenses of his purse."

SERENITY

THE PRESENTIMENT OF DANGER

MORAL PAIN

PHYSICAL PAIN

EXPRESSION OF NEUTRAL AMIABILITY
NOTHING IN THE EYES—
NOTHING IN THE MOUTH

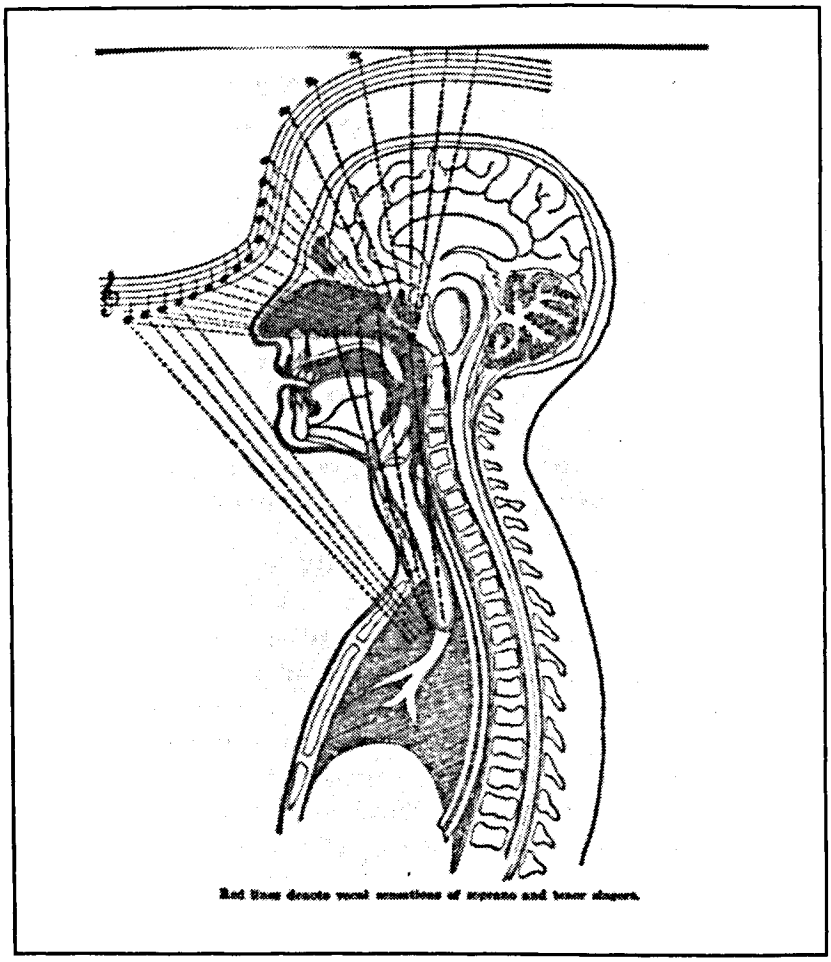
ECSTASY

If I imitate Guilbert and make my face Serene, Gray, or Neutrally Amiable, will I have introduced new desires, or will I have restaged the old ones?

Save money, save air: prudences of homosexuality, prudences of voice. Homosexuality and voice are economies of spending, concerned with what might go wrong or what has already gone wrong, eager to manage the flow of vital stuff. The body called "homosexual" is one place where the sexual system sputters, digresses, leaks; where an error in bookkeeping (a wasted sum) comes to light; where housekeeping fails. Because Freud influentially asserted the connection between paranoia, homosexuality, and anality, we often assume that when homosexuality isn't an erotics of wasteful, promiscuous spending, it is, conversely, an erotics of cautious, retentive budgeting.

In a singer's training, the conduct of the entire body—not merely the voice—is subject to punitive budgeting. Singing requires purity from top to bottom. Pedagogues have long recommended sexual abstinence and dietary moderation: Aristotle's *Problemata* asks, "Why does it spoil the voice to shout after food?" In the twentieth century, Millie Ryan recommends dried prunes for vocal health; Herbert Witherspoon encourages the use of cathartics, and warns that "the mucous membrane of the pharynx and mouth is a 'tell-tale' of no mean value, and will often show clearly the troubles existing below." A voice announces whether the body's waste system is functioning. Of course, voice not only describes the system, but turns the system into sensations and sounds that we imbibe without guile and without analysis. We quiver as we hear a voice, and what we are hearing and learning to love is a theory of the body. I, who can't carry a tune, am caught within this economy of vocal production as surely as if I were a singer.

"Red lines denote vocal sensations of soprano and tenor singers," writes Lilli Lehmann in *How to Sing*. Look at Lehmann's diagram of the singer: a ghoul, a skeleton, a survivor, shorn of identity's specifics. Without hair, without skin, without history, Lilli Lehmann's anatomy lesson looks like the self before categories—the subject, waiting to be named. (Is this singer male or female? Does it matter, if tenors and sopranos, according to Lehmann, feel the same sensations?) Lehmann's shorn singer is a dreary model for self-invention; but I will take it for my own. A force emanates from the singer's mouth—an "I" as elastic, transparent, and continuous as the soap bubble that the youth in the Chardin painting has been blowing for centuries, a bubble that no viewer can ever puncture.



I, who can't carry a tune, am caught within this economy of vocal production as surely as if I were a singer.

· *Regretful Coda #1* ·

I wanted pleasure to suffuse this chapter. And yet the manuals rarely speak of pleasure. Rapture seems to have no more place in a voice manual than in a guide to auto repair.

It is a pleasure to sing, but it is also a discipline; it is sexy to be homosexual, but it is also a confinement (within an illicit identity). Free expression is a fiction: when I express a self I am pressing it out by force, as in *espresso.* Voice and homosexuality are industries that

express what no body, left to its own devices, would care to produce. But bodies are never left to their own devices. And so my body produces homosexuality—sings it, expresses it. I don't have any choice. Homosexuality is the specific music my body makes. In retrospect I authorize the grand opera called "homosexuality," I forgive its dissonances and its outdated sentimental conclusions, I let the fantastic arias (The Sodomy Cabaletta, The Degeneration Cavatina, The Oral Scene, The Passive/Active Duet) purl uninhibitedly out of my mouth. Culture has called "homosexuality" the dirty X. The word we won't say. The word we mark in blood on doors. The sign of excommunication. The no-name of the outsider. In response, in retaliation, in revolt, I embrace the X; I plug my body into X; I ply X like a trade or a faith; I discover the beautiful, hardly audible overtones of X, which the world thought was a nightmare. I am X, I will always be X, the world can't rid me of X, the world can't rip X out of my body, I will write X wherever X has been erased.

Every unauthorized sexuality is an X. Hetero can be an X, too, if it tries.

Sexuality, whether homo or hetero, does not arrive only once, in that moment of revelation and proclamation that we call "coming out." Our body is always coming out. Every time is the first time. Every performance is a debut. Every arousal is a repetition of the first arousal. Every time you speak, you are coming out. Every time air makes the trip upstairs from lungs to larynx to mask, every time your body plays that old transcendental number, you are coming out. You *are* the OUT into which sexuality comes. Coming out is a way of telling a coherent story about one's sexuality, and it has worked political wonders, and it is a morally and psychologically cleansing process. But coming out is only one version of the vocalization underlying sexuality itself.

I have chosen to be vocal about sexuality (though many parts of sexuality—including my own—remain silent, inexpressible, resistant to category and phrase). And yet even if I didn't choose to be vocal about sexuality, even if I didn't come out, I'd already be vocalizing, for sexuality (as we know it) is always vocal, is ineluctably vocal, is structurally vocal.

Do we sing our sexualities, or do our sexualities sing us? Do we send sex out like tone into the air, or does sex send *us* into the air, propel *us* into repetitions and travesties we call "desire"?

Breath's excursion through the body to produce a voice is hardly

a pleasure trip. These are slow, brutal, ardent processes, so arduous and so similar that I will put their names on separate, parallel lines:

training a voice;
voicing a sexuality.

· *Regretful Coda #2* ·

I've used obsolete manuals as a pathway into the throat that will never be mine—the singing throat. It is a pointless search. You can't find the queen's throat in a book. You can't learn how to sing from Lilli Lehmann's *How to Sing*—though if you already know how to sing, her manual might give you valuable tips. I remember trying to learn coitus by reading textbooks on human sexuality and studying diagrams of the four rudimentary positions: man on top, woman on top, man and woman on their sides, rear entry. I tried to learn the rules of football and baseball from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* so I wouldn't make a fool of myself in gym. On a cloudy day in the mid-1960s I looked up "Theaters" in the Yellow Pages and copied the names and phone numbers of cinemas in my first address book, red, pocket-sized, with alphabetical dictionary-style tabs. I copied down the words "Burbank Theater," and the Burbank Theater's phone number (which I would never use), solely because the Burbank Theater had recently shown or would soon thereafter show the silent movie *Wings.* I knew the list of theaters would do me no good. But I wanted to make the list. I had faith, then, in compilations.

I have always pursued magic in dry ways—in rulebooks, encyclopedias, directories. Dreaming that love might arise from borrowed incantations, I studied spells from a do-it-yourself witchcraft handbook. But the manuals teach nothing. Singing will not resolve into rules. I have looked for presence in the wrong places.