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The Heart in Exile: Detachment and Desire in 1950s London

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Abstract

This essay explores the ‘underground’ queer culture of London, as mapped assiduously by the pseudonymous author, Rodney Garland, in his 1953 novel, *The Heart in Exile*. The novel charts the progress of its narrator, Dr Anthony Page, a psychiatrist, as he investigates a former lover's mysterious death.

His investigation draws him into the 'strange half-world of the homosexual', as a 1961 paperback edition of the novel announces; it is a world which Page maps in detail. The novel was reissued in 1995 with a preface by novelist and playwright Neil Bartlett, who claimed that Garland offers contemporary readers 'a perfect crash course in the prehistory of British gay culture', a 'systematic exploration of our twilight world'. This essay takes issue with that claim and suggests that we need to view Garland's London as radically *unfamiliar* territory – a *queer* world, but not a *gay* world as we now understand the term. It suggests that the task of recuperation – of finding 'our' hidden history – is an inadequate paradigm within which to read Garland's text. It defamiliarizes the London of 1953, mapping the ways in which the queer subject was then constituted, and demonstrates how *The Heart in Exile* is central to the project of destabilizing those categories of identity taken for granted today.

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