

Secrets From a Life: Authenticity and Spaces in Victorian Erotic Memoirs (REVISED)

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Descriptions of genitalia and various superhuman feats of sexual prowess are surely amusing, but they become less so once their patterns take on an uninspired automatic quality of repetition that could cause readers to lose interest. Erotic texts of the Victorian period, were, of course, brimming with this kind of thing, but their content is less interesting and important than their context. This is why Steven Marcus' notion of "pornotopia" (195) a never-ending textual pornographic ideal has been consistently reconsidered over the past half century. Erotic fiction is necessarily finite and one of the major shifts in erotic fiction during the Victorian period was to a place where the unreality of the genre could be mitigated: the memoir. The erotic memoir was a convenient vehicle for all facets of real and fantastical sexual experience. At the root of erotic memoir is the underlying notion that it contains an 'authentic' story straddling the divide between plausibility and unlikelihood. Anybody can write a memoir of erotic episodes that may be, on average, unremarkable and uninteresting if the experience is too run of the mill or, put another way, too similar to those of readers. What sets the memoirs discussed in this essay – *My Secret Life*, *The Lustful Turk*, *The Romance of Lust*, *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain*, *Letters from Laura and Eveline*, and *Teleny* – apart from something a reader could potentially live himself is the sheer volume of erotic episodes contained in each. They are at once fantastic and perhaps just tangible enough, with the inclusion of familiar places and social touchstones that, as a pornographic genre, they signalled a new kind of vicarious experience to readers. The subjects of these memoirs are further set apart from mainstream memoir in terms of physical stamina and variation on a single theme.

What is also unique to the memoir genre, and beneficial to pornography, is that a memoir need not confine itself to narrative structures in the same way as fiction and autobiography. As the memoir depicts first-hand accounts of events *from* a life, as opposed to a unified narrative of events *of* a life, there is little need or justification for narratives that adhere to specific parameters of

storytelling or resolution. Autobiography tends to indicate a sustained narrative “about a person, whereas a memoir does not have a person as its subject. Its focus is memory, either its recording or its sketching” (Rak 487). It is not enough, however, to simply put together a series of erotic episodes and experiences, true or not, without an appeal to the importance of memory. Memoir is not necessarily about self. To that end, erotic memoirs construct a world in which there is tension between truth and fiction by making claims to a text’s or writer’s authenticity, refracting social mores, including historical events or figures in the fantasy, or engaging in contemporary discourse from a dangerous vantage point – as is the case for many erotic Victorian texts that deal with sodomy and homosexuality. It seems crucial to many erotic memoirs to present a panoply of experiences in order to substantiate the explicit or implicit promises made to readers which act as an unspoken agreement that stipulates the terms under which the reader will act as participant in the private narrative. The convention of authenticity lubricates one’s willing (or willful) suspension of disbelief.

My Secret Life, the erotic memoir of ‘Walter’ – no surname or other identifying information is given – which ran to eleven volumes published between approximately 1888 and 1894, is the *non plus ultra* example of the genre and its various permutations and conventions. The set comes near the end of the Victorian period and encompasses everything and more contained in the other memoirs discussed herein. It claims to contain Walter’s “erotic existence, or *private confessions* and autobiography” that are “set down day by day, from boyhood onwards” (qtd. in Mendes 162 – 163) and told from the perspective of an aged Walter. *My Secret Life* cannot be considered an autobiography because “as far as Victorian autobiography is concerned, this meant that the focus was for many years on a limited canon of ‘great’ male-authored works, created by a sense that only certain kinds of people have a ‘right’ to autobiography” (Sanders 3) whereas the memoir highlighted

key events from a life and was not viewed as a complete narrative with the requisite introspection demanded by autobiography.

The advert for the early and exclusive – supposedly only six copies were published, with a total asking price of £1100 – edition of *My Secret Life* also claimed that “no words can paint its peculiarities, because it is simply and honestly true” (qtd. in Mendes 162). The ‘true’ portion is the simplest and most important aspect of the advert; the rest details examples of every vice Walter has delighted in, the variety of his sexual experiences and partners, and the book itself features an extensive index for the purposes of easily searching out specific scenes or activities. *My Secret Life*, in addition to an almost ideal example of erotic memoir, is also a reference work. For readers it has the added feature of being ‘true.’ Whoever authored *My Secret Life* had, perhaps knowingly, invoked Samuel Johnson’s edict that

he that sits down calmly and voluntarily to review his life for the admonition of posterity, or to amuse himself, and leaves this account unpublished, may be commonly presumed to tell truth, since falshood [*sic*] cannot appease his own mind, and fame will not be heard beneath the tomb. (342)

The introduction bears this out, as the unnamed editor of the volumes relates how he was instructed by the author, who had fallen ill, to destroy the manuscript upon his death. There is no doubt that significant portions of the book are true, insofar as they may have happened to somebody at some point, but that every episode detailed amounts to the experience of a solitary man whose ‘secret life’ was busy enough to keep a group of people occupied for a lifetime, forgetting for a moment that Walter’s ‘secret life’ was, in effect, *another* life, separate from his public persona that presumably fit in seamlessly with Victorian mores.

The important factor in thinking of *My Secret Life* as memoir rather than autobiography is that “autobiography was more likely to reveal the truth of character” (Nussbaum 314). The tension between truth and fiction in *MSL* is the tension between fact and fantasy that is integral to erotic memoirs and it means that

When it comes to matters of reporting about sexual experience, there is always an intermixture of fact and fantasy, that the fantasies are at least equally important as the ‘facts,’ and that they have as much if not more meaning to them, we must in our examination of these documents pay as much respect to their errors and falsifications as we do to those parts of the account which seem, in the usual sense of the expression, to have actually happened. (Marcus 114)

What Marcus says above about *MSL* applies to all erotic memoirs and indicates the slippage that occurs when reading or studying these works. The studious, cynical, and skeptical reader or scholar ought to recognize the near impossibility that everything written in an erotic memoir actually occurred, but at the same time marvel that it occurred in somebody’s fantasy and consider the context and events that brought the book into existence, the work becomes less about discerning truth from fiction and more about interpreting the events and opinions depicted as a discursive voice and participant of a particular period. Walter himself asks, in the preface to *MSL*, “does every man kiss, coax, hint smuttily, then talk bawdily [*sic*], snatch a feel, smell his fingers, assault, and win, exactly as I have done?” (13) rhetorically as a way to situate readers that further confirms their agreement that what they are about to partake in will be an exclusive peek behind the curtain of a man’s most private confessions and that that man may have a much greater breadth of experience than the Everyman but his motivations are likely not all that different. In this way, apart from the

copious amounts of sex Walter or any other erotic memoir depicts, the reader reaffirms his¹ capacity for self-control, a masculine trait. By living vicariously through the lechery of the protagonist, the reader has allowed himself to share in and mentally mimic the experiences described while maintaining complete control. The privilege afforded in reading pornography – apart from the inherent privilege in the material object itself – is such that the reader, on one level, participates in proscribed acts and, on another level, claims no responsibility for the acts themselves. The reader maintains composure outwardly while indulging in an escapism not unlike that found in mainstream literature.

Although reading erotic memoirs can be seen as a kind of escapism, so too is it a method of reinscribing social stratifications and the superiority, moral and imperial, of the target audience for whom costlier texts were produced. Stratification of class was as prevalent in the range of pornography available as in everyday Victorian life. By the end of the century, a collector class had become apparent and the most exclusive erotic literature had its access limited by either smaller print runs or prohibitive price structuring. In addition, the purchase of a commodity like pornography brought with it the inherent risk that the reader may not get a return on his investment as “postal confiscations, pornographers’ frequent moves, and the lack of assurance that letters would reach distributors meant that the purchased goods might never arrive” (Sigel 89). If *MSL* presented the broadest range of sexual experiences, it is only because its writer(s) and publisher(s) saw a demand in the market for a comprehensive work. Before *MSL*, other examples of memoirs filled various niches within the market. Spawned in the eighteenth century from the success of *Fanny Hill*, the popularity of the erotic epistolary memoir in the nineteenth century would wane in the high Victorian period

¹ For the sake of period context I am working with the assumption that the ideal – which is not to say *only* – reader for the erotic memoir was male.

but rebound later in the century. *The Lustful Turk* is more reminiscent of the earlier epistolary tradition as the first printing is noted as 1828 (Fraxi 134) making it temporally pre-Victorian and, as such, predating the apex of the erotic book trade in Britain; however, subsequent reprints from 1860 onward afford *The Lustful Turk* a place amongst other Victorian erotic texts. The letters, written from the perspective of Emily Barlow, an Englishwoman captured on her way to India to collect an inheritance, and the Dey of Algiers, whose harem Emily and her cousin Eliza unwillingly become part of, form a narrative whose organization and framing share more with literary forms of the eighteenth century rather than late nineteenth century memoirs. While the epistolary memoir was not unheard of later in the century – *Letters from Laura and Eveline*, discussed later, is an example – it was certainly the exception rather than the rule. What *The Lustful Turk* shares with later works is its claim to have been “Faithfully and Vividly Depicted...described with that zest and simplicity, which always gives guarantee for its authenticity” (5). The “guarantee” of authenticity is a pornographic as well as a broader literary convention designed to initiate the reader into an otherwise private story or series of events. If readers believe the contents to be true or, in this case “authentic,” those readers are not, then, simply consuming a story but rather being inducted into an exclusive community. To read an eroticized story like *The Lustful Turk* with its promise of authenticity is the realization of a fantasy which, although an illusion, vicariously grants readers the power/pleasure afforded to participants in the story.

In the case of *The Lustful Turk*, authenticity is inextricably tied to nationalism. The titular Turk is naturally an object of scorn to British readers, and his habit of kidnapping, raping, and enslaving women for his harem had become a familiar Orientalist trope, not to mention the feminization of Arabs and Eastern peoples in general. In one of her early letters, Emily describes herself, and her loss of virtue at the lascivious hands of the Dey of Algiers, as “the polluted

concubine of this most worthless Turk" (16), cementing the delicate balance between readers' opposition to the Oriental other's control over what rightfully belongs to Englishmen and sympathizing with his motivation for doing so. Almost sixty years after *The Lustful Turk's* first publication, Richard Burton's terminal essay in his voluminous translation of *The Thousand Nights and a Night* (better known as *The Arabian Nights*) and his translations of Arabic sex manuals helped delineate Orientalist fantasies and sexualities into a nationalist context. His notion of a "Sotadic Zone" which covered "the whole of Asia Minor and Mesopotamia occupied by the 'unspeakable Turk,'" (Burton vol. 10 232) where "there is a blending of the masculine and feminine temperaments" (208) retrospectively explains the main premise and denouement of *The Lustful Turk*. Once the Turk conquers the virtue of English women – and by proxy, a tangible threat to England itself – he is emasculated by a knife-wielding Greek concubine who cuts off his "pinnacle of strength" (188) and he completes the act himself by having his testicles surgically removed "remarking at the same time that life would be a very hell if he retained the desire after the power was dead" (189). The emasculation complete, the Turk releases his prized English concubines thus relenting his hold on Englishness and is rendered powerless; his newfound sexlessness feminizes him and he becomes aware that the core of his control was, symbolically, his genitalia.

Burton's Sotadic Zone theory similarly emasculated/feminized Arabic cultures thereby displacing "British discourse about homosexuality around Arab sexuality" (Colligan 86) which *The Lustful Turk* had already done. The Turk (or Arab) fills the lacuna by standing in for the Briton's fear of losing that which he has conquered. In the end, though the tale's authenticity is "guaranteed", in a feat of unparalleled cognitive dissonance, the British reader has identified with the lustful Turk himself, been privy to his perversions and lecherous fulfillments with white British women, and ultimately castrated the villainous heathen for sins committed against Britannia, thus returning

Britain to her rightful place above the “unspeakable Turk.” The fantasy of *The Lustful Turk* depends on western ignorance of the Arab world. The unfamiliarity of the lecherous Orient(al) makes the Turk easily disposable without threatening the reader’s own masculinity.

The more familiar Englishness of *The Romance of Lust* makes it as influential a Victorian erotic memoir as *My Secret Life*, even if it is easily outstripped by the latter in terms of length and breadth of experience. Ostensibly the memoir of a man named Charles Roberts, told from the perspective of advanced years, Charles begins his narrative from the age of fifteen by recounting his earliest sexual encounters with a married woman, his governess, and, eventually, a full complement of incestuous encounters. Charles often resorts to the defense of acts that are contra to common law by declaring that incest, for instance, “stimulates our passions and stiffens our pricks, so that if even we be in the wane of life, vigour is imparted by reason of the very fact of conventional laws” (57) and other acts are similarly acknowledged throughout the memoir’s four volumes. The memoir follows, in the first three volumes, a pattern of curiosity, naiveté, and initiation into the secrets of lust. Charles is ‘initiated’ by various mature women who are led to believe they alone have claimed his virginity. The rest of the memoir sees Charles involved in various forms of sexual congress with multiple partners of both sexes. The apotheosis of pleasure is always anal intercourse. Charles first experiences the pleasures of sodomy with his female partners and plays both active and receptive roles with these women, the latter effected via enlarged clitorises that act just like penises. As the memoir continues, however, it is clear that Charles has a taste for same-sex love in all its forms including sodomy. Charles’ sexuality is fluid and telling of the lack of categorization or stress imposed on identifying one’s physical acts with an actual account of oneself. For Charles Roberts — and his partners — it is perfectly acceptable to oscillate between objects of desire regardless of sex and gender so long as the main aim is pleasure. It would seem that Charles Roberts is, in this way, a model representative of

the Victorian libertine and embodied the carefree existence of one who is not constrained by his behaviour to a specific sexual category, although he does allude throughout the text that certain of his actions are against common law, which shows a great deal of self-awareness on the part of the author(s) and would also have been didactic to readers.

The final volume in *The Romance of Lust*, more so than the preceding volumes, gives clues to the ostensible authenticity of the memoir. Using Victorian pornographic bibliographer and collector Henry Spencer Asbhee's insight into the book's production as a starting point, it should not be surprising that the memoir is "not the produce of a single pen, but consists of several tales...woven into a connected narrative by a gentleman, perfectly well known to the present generation of literary eccentrics and collectors" (III 188). This gentleman was William Simpson Potter, a pornography collector and traveller who was likely involved in various round-robin compositions of erotic literature from the 1860s until his death in 1879 (Mendes 236 – 237). It is in volume four of *Romance* that the author(s) hint at common connections within the pornographic book trade in London. At this point in the memoir, Charles has matriculated to King's College and taken lodgings "in Norfolk Street, Strand, for the convenience of being near" (403) the school. Charles' sodomitical partner, Mr. MacCallum, had, at the same time, "taken a small set of chambers at Lyon's Inn...where he had a complete library of bawdy books and pictures" (416), which is also near King's College. Conveniently as well for McCallum, was that Lyon's Inn "faced Newcastle Street, on its eastern side, between Wych Street and Holywell Street; one entrance led to it from the latter" (Thornbury 32) and that easy access to Holywell Street, where much of the trade in pornographic materials in Victorian London was centered, would have allowed him to build his collection. *Romance* is a text that uses place as a way of reaffirming its authenticity. Later, a specific address in Paris appears in Charles' memoir, 60 rue de Rivoli, where "an old bawd" (465) resides and he arranges to organize a viewing

of “an actual scene of sodomy” (465) between two men. While the reference to the Parisian address is less clear-cut than the London addresses, it is almost certainly of significance as a guide of some description. With rue de Rivoli’s connotation as a posh Parisian address, it reinscribes, perhaps, the connection between the London upper class pornography consumer and access to exclusive materials and acts that were placed well out of the reach of the lower class reader. Viewing the ‘French vice’ of sodomy at a posh Parisian address was, in a word, exclusive. Exclusive in taste as well as carnal knowledge. Sodomy was routinely expurgated – or simply not present in the first place – in cheaper erotic texts. Discourse about posh locales and geographic clues, such as those in *Romance*, helped to delineate worthy readerships along with the codification the content implied.

Romance was not the only erotic work to incorporate geographical clues – as will be seen below – about the clandestine book trade into its pages and, by doing so, author(s) may have been relaying information to readers, in the form of a clandestine kind of product placement, or bolstering the authenticity of their texts by including landmarks and geographical clues they thought their readers would or should have known. The authenticity of an erotic memoir can only be helped by inclusion of places familiar to readers, but the purpose of including specific addresses could also have an instructional function, making erotic memoirs and other kinds of erotic texts useful not only as entertainment but also guidebooks in the tradition of the *Yokel’s Preceptor*, a supposed “warning to the inexperienced” (2) on how to get by in London unscathed, with particular areas to avoid. In actuality, the *Preceptor* was a guide to all the sins London had to offer, from gin and gambling palaces to the best places to find visceral pleasures suiting any taste. Geography that can be traced back to either the clandestine book trade or notorious events is a unifying factor within all the memoirs included in this study and, apart from adding a level of authenticity, it constitutes, in fact, only one of many codes present in the genre as a whole. At any rate, mapping the sexual city and its available

sins seemed to be part of the larger *raison d'être* of many erotic memoirs. Even if readers never experienced first-hand the pleasurable addresses mentioned, it makes sense that these works may have fulfilled a role akin to sexual tourism. Like with the figure of the lustful Turk, the reader is able to engage in a fantasy that is only partly formulated by his own preconceived notions of the Orient (or Paris or the exotic locales within his own city). Erotic memoirs could fill in the rest of the details.

Directly engaging with the *Preceptor's* warnings about “monsters in the shape of men, commonly designated *Margeries, Pooffs, &c...* [who] actually walk the streets the same as the whores, looking out for a chance!” (5 – 6) *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* is the clandestinely published 1881 memoir in which the subtitle, *Recollections of a Mary Ann*, is a clear indication of its subject matter. The “Mary Ann,” a derogatory term for an effeminate man or male prostitute, in question is the memoir’s subject and ostensible author, Jack Saul. ‘Recollections’ form the basis of this or any memoir. In the case of *Sins* the reader is asked to consider from the outset these recollections from the memory of an ‘authentic’ source, even though in terms of his position in society his word would not have necessarily been granted the kind of trustworthy privilege afforded to one such as Mr. Cambon. The reliance on memory, whether the events portrayed are fictive or not, immediately frames the memoir genre and establishes the level of credibility of the source. In Saul’s (or others of the erotic memoir genre) case, the memories being provided offer information not generally available but also wanting credibility since his position immediately identifies him as low class. In order to establish that Saul’s recollections are in fact worthy of the reader’s time and money the memoir is first framed by a wealthy patron called Mr. Cambon, who narrates in the first person, recounting his meeting with an “effeminate but very good-looking young fellow...dressed in tight-fitting clothes” who was “favoured by nature by a very extraordinary development of the male appendages” (3) whom he follows to a picture gallery – following almost exactly the *Preceptor's*

warning that such “sods...generally congregate around picture shops” (6) – and subsequently hires for sex. After some curated description of Cambon’s and Saul’s multiple sexual encounters – reminiscent of the surfeit of pornographic texts available in Victorian London – Cambon wishes not to “pall his readers [with] repetition of [their] numerous orgies of lust” but instead opts to “content [him]self” (10) with presenting the memoirs he has commissioned Saul to write at a rate of £5 per week beginning with a section entitled “Early Development of Pederastic Ideas in His Youthful Mind” (10). In presenting Saul’s recollections as a commissioned lot, the narrative is straight away framed in such a way as to distance itself from the common constraints of the pornographic genre. The sections ultimately end up, however, by falling into the common tropes of repetition, overwrought description of body parts and functions, as well as a picaresque assortment of lascivious scenes. Saul's memoir is comprised of first person accounts of every kind of sexual experience, from boyhood through adulthood; pansexual, amateur to professional, delivered via Mr. Cambon, acting pseudoanthropologically, making Saul less of a reflective character and more an embodiment of sex.

The memoir takes the shape of so much Victorian pornography, with its flagellation scenes and repetitive descriptions of copulation. There are also other standard scenes including early experiences with a cousin, first homosexual encounters at boarding school, and, later, descriptions of soldiers and others in London’s sex trade Saul became part of. There are also unique scenarios that fall outside the scope of expected or canonical sexual encounters, among these are a scene of bestiality and instances of hermaphroditism and gender inversion, as well as miscegenation. The memoir ends abruptly and is followed by short essays in defense of sodomy and, surprisingly, ‘tribadism’ (lesbianism) that make no claim to having been penned or inspired by Saul and appear out of nowhere and out of sync with the rest of the narrative. It is not until the 1893 novel *Telery*

that a *Bildungsroman* with a more traditional narrative structure and denouement emerges. The difference, of course, is that the memoir genre *Sins* is part of offers its readers a supposedly more authentic experience if they believe the subject to be a real person. In other notable erotic memoirs, there is little evidence that the subject is an actual person and little to sustain the belief that the memoir is, in fact, true. This would be the case with *Sins* except that the name Jack Saul would appear outside the pages of pornography.

Sins' publication in 1881 is significant in the timeline of Saul. It is the first time that Saul's name appears published anywhere, but if the memoir holds any truth, Saul had been involved in a notorious scandal ten years prior in London's West End. Just before a chapter entitled "Some Frolics with Boulton and Park" (45) Saul recounts an integral scene in the 1870 Boulton and Park cross-dressing scandal in which the two defendants, Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park – dressed in their female guises as Stella and Fanny, respectively – were accused of conspiracy to commit a felony (as sodomy was termed) with Member of Parliament Lord Arthur Clinton and others. In Boulton and Park's trial a year later, it could not be proved that the felony had taken place and many of the details were deemed too shocking to be published in the papers, but Saul's recollection recounts the unproven act with Lord Arthur in great detail from a voyeuristic keyhole perspective, furnishing every last detail. In his three volume *Bibliography of Prohibited Books*, Henry Spencer Ashbee suggests that the descriptions of Boulton and Park in *Sins* "would almost appear to have been sketched from personal acquaintance" (195), though he gives no further information as to why this might have been the case. A recent Boulton and Park biography by Neil McKenna actually takes this speculation a step further and fearlessly mixes facts from the trial with Saul's description of what he witnessed through the keyhole which, of course, does not aid in proving whether Saul's narrative is authentic, but does stand as a testament to the power of appropriating and narrativizing real-life events to

augment readers' enjoyment of a particular work across genres. *Sins* is a particularly good example of the tension between fiction and veracity in the memoir genre; on the one hand it is difficult to believe the memoir is true, and discerning Victorian readers would not have been remiss to have kept this in mind as they read, but the off chance that it *might* be true was likely sufficient to maintain enticement and investment in a story that, perhaps, reflected a reader's own experiences or identity. *Sins* was assuredly enticing enough to help fill out a narrative and give the real-life characters in McKenna's *Fanny and Stella* melodrama more depth than they might have had in a strictly verisimilar study.

Jack Saul made another appearance in 1890 when he – or somebody using the name – turned witness for the prosecution in another west end scandal, this time involving a male brothel at 19 Cleveland Street where Saul supposedly worked. In the course of the libel trial that was brought against a newspaper editor for alleging the Earl of Euston had patronized the brothel, Saul took the witness stand and gave testimony that he was employed, in his own words, as a “professional sodomite” (qtd. in Kaplan 187) and that he had accompanied the Earl to the brothel so the latter could procure sex with young men and boys working there. In the course of Saul's testimony, he also admitted that he had offered evidence in a similar scandal involving Dublin Castle officials in his native Ireland five years earlier, but that his information was considered by the presiding magistrate in the trial too old to be of use. Not much of what Saul said on the witness stand correlates with the recollections in *Sins* and some details directly contradict the memoir. For example, the Saul in *Sins* claims to be of the “farmer class in Suffolk” (10 – 11) while the Saul on the witness stand claimed Irish heritage, though none of the newspaper accounts from the Cleveland Street trial make mention of Saul's Irish accent. Regardless of the facts of Saul's life (lives?), the crucial point is how his name and character straddle the boundaries between history and fiction as a relay for sexual

identities. Saul's association with two, and possibly three, significant homosexual sex scandals of the late nineteenth century afford him a unique position as an 'authentic' voice for an erotic memoir.

By the end of *Sins* readers will be no further ahead if discerning the truthfulness of the memoir is their intent. As mentioned above, the book closes with essays in defense of sodomy and tribadism that appear after the abrupt terminal incest scene in Saul's memoir. There are no indications of the essays' authorship and they ought to be treated as separate from the memoir. Ashbee considers them "entirely insignificant" (III 195) and the editor of the most recent modern edition renders them of "little interest" for their lack of commentary "on the legal situation in England [and] nothing on attempts to explain and justify 'man-manly love'" (*Sins* xviii), but these hasty dismissals are shortsighted. I will concede the essays are of limited value apropos of the preceding text, but they do offer a way of reading a text like *Sins* or any other sodomitical text. The essays give historical examples of sexual deviance from "Nero [having] his mother" (83) to a contemporary "gipsy found guilty, first of all of having his own donkey, and afterwards a neighbour's little boy" (85) among other fine examples. Largely, however, the essays give a pedestrian discussion on sodomy and not much else. The essay on tribadism, "a vice which every man in his heart looks on with kindly eyes" (88), likens it to the equivalent of sodomy that a female turns to "when she has exhausted every lech of the male fancy" (89). Rather than being masterpieces of rhetoric in the defense of these topics, the essays serve as a medium to speak freely about them and offer a rare space for non-derisory perspectives. While no profundities have been discovered within these terminal essays, the fact of their existence, like Saul's memoir itself, adds incrementally to knowledge of the spaces and locations one could reasonably expect to find sexual expression. A specific example given in the essay on tribadism mentions a "café in the Haymarket," an area of London well known as a haven for prostitution, where a "Frenchwoman... offered a

young English girl ten shillings to be allowed to kiss her cunt” (89). It is not difficult to imagine this would have been reasonably enticing to certain readers.

Some of *Sins*' final scenes find Saul 'frolicking' with Boulton and Park after the keyhole scene and this continues in the later epistolary memoir billed as "An Appendix to the Sins of the Cities" entitled *Letters from Laura and Eveline* [1883]. Laura and Eveline were the names used by Ernest Boulton and Jack Saul, respectively, in *Sins*. There is no evidence that anyone named Jack Saul was involved in the Boulton and Park affair or that the accused knew anyone of that name, but small details are not sufficient to stop enterprising erotica producers from capitalizing on the situation, which is precisely what *Letters* does. The epistles that make up the memoir, two letters detailing the events of the title characters' wedding nights and honeymoons, makes no explicit guarantee to authenticity like *The Lustful Turk*, though the subtitle, *Giving an Account of their Mock-Marriage, Wedding Trip, etc. Published as an Appendix to the Sins of the Cities*, implicitly coattails *Sins* and the veracity inherent to that text's use of the Boulton and Park material. Readers familiar with *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain* would have instantly speculated that *Letters* contained further exclusive sights of Boulton (and perhaps Park) and Jack Saul. What makes *Letters* unique amongst the erotic memoir genre is the relative certainty with which it can be deemed a fiction. Unlike its predecessor there is nothing within the book, aside from names lifted out of the Boulton and Park affair, which would lead anyone to the conclusion that the letters themselves depict anything that actually happened. *Letters* functions at the level of fantasy masquerading as an authentic account that makes no appeal to authenticity apart from its surface allusiveness to *Sins*. *Letters* capitalizes on arm's-length authenticity, its tenuous association with another memoir of questionable veracity the only thing setting it apart, whereas the other memoirs discussed in this essay are ostensibly authentic accounts doubling as objects of fantasy. The other memoirs are based on private affairs rather than well-

publicized ones, so confirming their veracity proves more difficult than when a detailed court record of one's private affairs exists, as in the case of Boulton and Park, whose trial has been mentioned already.

Letters stands out amongst many examples of the genre, however, as one in which sexualities and genders are treated as fluid and the participants in the action vacillate between kinksterism and self-awareness of identities beyond the physical acts portrayed. In the first letter, written by Laura (Ernest Boulton), describing her wedding night with Lord Arthur (as in Lord Arthur Clinton, the Member of Parliament involved in the Boulton and Park affair) expresses at once confusion and excitement at the latter's 'discovery' that Laura's enlarged 'clitoris' makes her "like an hermaphrodite" (10) after which the husband treats it exactly like a penis (which it is)² and remarks at how much further behind her vagina seems to be compared with other women's. Scenes such as this first encounter are repeated throughout *Letters* and it is never made clear whether the husbands are ignorant of their partners' biological sex or not. For the brides' part, it seems immaterial what their husbands believe since it is "awfully delicious to be taken for a woman, and addressed as a woman" (13) though this is later described as a "delightful illusion" (17). Eveline expounds on the pleasures of being a hermaphrodite via allusion to "hermaphrodites of ancient times" who enjoyed "delicious double sexuality which the passive Sodomite enjoys" (48). This appeal to the tradition of sodomy and pleasure is a nod to the Marquis de Sade who wrote, in *Philosophy in the Boudoir*, that "to fuck women in the rear is but the first stage of buggery; Nature wishes that men should practice this fancy with men above all" (56 – 57), which was not so much a privileging of hermaphroditism but rather the idea that taking pleasure in what man considers unnatural originates in Nature herself.

² We can be reasonably assured that it is a penis because Boulton and Park were given thoroughly invasive – and unauthorized – physical examinations by a London police surgeon, the details of which were reported in the media. More detail is given about this below.

Self-awareness of sexuality, identity, gender, and pleasure of this sort runs throughout *Letters*, which explicitly references de Sade at various points, imbues the characters' pleasure with an animism similar to de Sade's *Nature* and makes the hermaphrodites and their husbands pleasure-seekers who – rather than seeking to mimic heteronormative ideals of lust, romance, ritual, and physical sensation – create an alternate form of pleasure set apart from acceptable forms. By pilfering identities from the Boulton and Park trial as well as Jack Saul, *Letters* embodies inversion by placing real inverters and characters who have successfully upset traditional gender roles in the social conscience of Britain. 'Inversion' has evolved since *Letters* and has had myriad nomenclatural permutations. Its characters can retroactively be viewed in terms of their aesthetic objectification, which made them successfully antithetical to Victorian morality. Laura and Eveline are effectively queer in the Victorian sense of something peculiar as well as the more modern derogatory sense.

Queering can happen within a text, like the previous example, but it can also occur materially about a text. I would argue that any of the texts in this essay could be considered 'queer' judged on their contents and necessarily secretive dissemination; however, the story of the novel *Teleny* takes this one step further. In a small bookshop in London's Coventry Street near the end of 1890 its proprietor, a French bookseller called Charles Hirsch, claimed that "a gentleman of forty years, large, fairly podgy, with the absolutely beardless face of a matte paleness...who wore on his wrist a row of thin gold bracelets garnished with coloured stones" (*Teleny* [2010] 171) came into his shop, the *Librarie Parisienne*, and handed him a notebook with the instruction that it be given to a friend showing the calling card of the podgy customer in question, Oscar Wilde. Hirsch alleges that the friend came a few days later, retrieved the notebook, returned it a few days hence, and that "the same ceremony took place three more times" (172), after which Hirsch happened to read the manuscript before returning it to Wilde. The manuscript, written in this round-robin fashion

according to Hirsch, became the homosexual romance novel *Teleny*³, published clandestinely in 1893. The novel, which made, on its initial publication, no claims of being an 'authentic' account and not a memoir per se, functions nonetheless as a confessional record of homosexuality in Victorian Britain. The entire work and its provenance are an exercise in queerness and disruption, beginning with the first line of the 1893 edition, which reads, "Tell me your story from its very beginning, Des Grieux," said he interrupting me; 'and how you got to be acquainted with him'" (3). The unknown interlocutor interrupts a story already in progress to request that Camille Des Grieux, the protagonist, return to the beginning and *then* relate the story of his love affair with the mysterious Hungarian pianist, René Teleny.

Teleny reads like a Victorian *Bildungsroman* with the exception that its romantic interests are male. There are also a significant number of visceral descriptions of sexual acts, which pornify the text. Des Grieux's account follows the familiar pattern of the erotic memoir, from early experiences to late life, interspersed with various forms of 'initiation'. It centers on one object of desire, the title character, that is not wholly physical. Unlike other erotic memoirs, however, *Teleny* never makes explicit claims to verisimilitude. It was not until Charles Hirsch republished *Teleny* in 1934 when he returned the novel's setting to, he claims, its original London and reproduced, from memory, the prologue he says was part of the original manuscript as he read it. Hirsch's edition – which included his "Notice" that recounted the story of *Teleny*'s roundrobin production and Wilde's alleged involvement – is more of a memoir than the original edition. If Hirsch can be believed, his is the only version of *Teleny* that is 'authentic' and faithful to the long lost original manuscript. Hirsch points to a number of descriptive "improbabilities" (174) in the 1893 edition of *Teleny* printed by

³ Though Hirsch claims to have mistakenly read the title as *Feleny*, his 'mistake' seems more like a calculated play on 'felony,' which referred to the unnamable offense of sodomy (*Teleny* [2010] 172).

Leonard Smithers who, it should be noted, originally published Wilde's "Ballad of Reading Gaol" and would go on to publish Wilde forgeries and unauthorized versions of his works after the author's death. These improbabilities are scenes ostensibly describing Parisian neighbourhoods and locales but easily mapping onto London locales with their "poor wretched houses" and stores "that sell fish, mussels, and chips" in addition to "sombre buildings...caked with soot" (174). After indicating these improbabilities to the publisher, Smithers informed Hirsch that "he had touched up the text out of prudish scruples...[adding] that a definitive version existed" (174) and would be printed some day. Smithers died before being able to do this and the location of the manuscript for his definitive version was lost, prompting Hirsch to 'correct' what he acknowledged as a publishing error.

Hirsch's version of the original text necessarily privileges him as the authority in the same way as a memoir's protagonist or narrator. Hirsch is the only source of the information on Wilde's connection to *Teleny* as well as the manuscript version with its "curious mixture of various handwritings, of erased parts, omitted, corrected or added pages by different hands" (172) and it should stand to reason that his story is more easily vetted than those appearing in *My Secret Life*, *The Romance of Lust*, or any other supposed authentic account, but the opposite is true. Corroboration for Hirsch's story is sorely wanting. Of all the revelations about *Teleny* by Hirsch, the one that can be viewed as most important is Wilde's involvement. It is impossible to say for certain whether Wilde had a hand in the creation or editing of the book and this tiny doubt has persisted throughout *Teleny*'s publishing history in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, at least, since Hirsch's version and "Notice" did not appear until 1934. *Teleny* can be viewed as an ideal model for erotic memoir, even though it does not actively classify itself as memoir. Its mythology – unquestionably catalyzed by Hirsch – as a lost Wilde work is a significant part of its sustenance. The uncertainties of

provenance, authorship, and authority in erotic memoir work in much the same way. On the level of vicarious living, *Teleny* itself may fall short in comparison with an explicitly 'authentic' erotic memoir but its queer composition history and narrative frame give it, in practice, the form of a memoir.

Hirsch's recounted prologue is told from the perspective of the interlocutor who interrupts Des Grieux at the beginning of the novel proper. This character has inserted himself into the narrative as an active witness rather than a passive listener/interviewer with phrases such as "I had met [Des Grieux], then [before the beginning of the story], in the company of a young, well-known Hungarian artist named T****" (*Teleny* [1984] 21). This transcriber becomes a part of the narrative so the story being told to the interviewer in the book has also been transcribed by one who is, ostensibly, directly involved within the story as it is being related. This makes for an interesting mirroring of the 'collaborative' effort in getting the book to print. This prologue also places the transcriber as the "sole participant in the brief evening funeral rites that are customarily performed in Nice for sick foreigners who have come there to die" (22) after Des Grieux's death. This is privileging whoever this transcriber might be in much the same way that Hirsch himself is privileged as the sole source of the apocryphal story behind *Teleny*'s composition. The choice of using an unnamed narrator through which to tell the story "constructs a scenario in which the very form of the novel, as a dialogue between men, also serves as a model for its communal or collective authorship" (Gray and Keep 198). Trusting the uncorroborated word of Hirsch about a text as important as *Teleny* is, at best, difficult and both the prologue and the story of the novel's composition reflect hubris in the person(s) delivering both. If Hirsch's account is accurate it "tells a larger story about juridical enforcement and media competition putting pressure on the clandestine book trade in London at the end of the century" (Colligan 216) as well as formation of sexual identities.

The novel forms an identity of the collaborative work as something averse to the burgeoning identity of the singular authorial hand. The fact that the novel remains, officially, an anonymous work and, perhaps more troubling, the work of many unnamed hands lends an air of queerness to the process of writing even though “it is [considered]...the most natural thing in the world that people...whose social needs and knowledges may have so much in common, should band together also on the axis of social desire” (Sedgwick 32). If Wilde *did* have a hand in writing *Teleny* there would be every reason to interrogate the text’s settings further. Wilde’s attachment would lend a heretofore unprecedented form of legitimacy to a pornographic text, though it may also diminish his own legacy as author to have such a relatively poorly-constructed work positively attributed to him.

The novel’s composition as well as its narrative reflect the idea of collaboration and community formation in terms of social desire that becomes intertwined with the sexual. The fledgling gay social circles of the novel are inextricably linked to sex and desire, both sexual and social as Camille Des Grieux becomes initiated ever more thoroughly into London’s underground gay community through his association with René Teleny. According to Gray and Keep “*Teleny* frustrates the ‘man-and-his-work’ paradigm by offering an image of a queer writing practice characterized by fluidity, circulation, and exchange” (196), which can be seen as a reflection of the *Zeitgeist* in Victorian ideas of sexuality. In other words, a community of like-minded men coming together to clandestinely compose a novel like *Teleny* tells its own story before pen is even put to paper. Identity formation is central to *Teleny*’s role in the canon of erotic memoir, while the novel “explicitly represents sexual practices between men for an audience who either enjoyed or at least sympathized with such practices, it still reinscribes these representations within the (hetero)sexual symbolic order that it sought to interrupt” (Cohen 810). Although *Teleny* does its work of identity formation on the level of protest or resistance to an established order, it ultimately must do so

within the system that actively opposes it, allowing the novel to be equal but separate to other forms of memoir or confessional that are not explicitly queer, but rather journey to the precipice of queerness without explicitly identifying with it.

By engaging with its queerness, in terms of the overt homosexuality within its pages, *Teleny* does not fit neatly into categorization as an erotic memoir; Des Grieux, in one of many biologically essentialist arguments in the book, proclaims, "I know that I was born a sodomite, the fault is my constitution's, not mine own" (*Teleny* [2010] 47). The essentialism of sexuality in *Teleny* is juxtaposed with the deliberate inclusion of scandalous Continental sexological discourse: Ambrose Tardieu's 1857 *Etude Médico-légale sur les Attentats aux Moeurs* [*Forensic Study of Sexual Offences*] is alluded to as "a modern medical book" (48) by Des Grieux as he finishes a monologue on homosexuality through history. Tardieu's work likely inspired the temerarious police surgeon in the 1870 Boulton and Park affair who had taken it upon himself to examine the men for physical evidence of sodomy and reported his observations about their genitalia in terms similar to Tardieu's descriptions of sodomitical anatomy. Tardieu's work focused on one kind of sub-normative set of perversions – specifically pedophiles – but the allusion by Des Grieux refers to the physiognomy of sodomites' genitalia which comes to resemble the pointed penis of a dog. *Teleny*'s engagement with queerness in contemporary fin-de-siècle discourses, rather than any explicit insistence on the authenticity of its narrative, gives the novel veracity and a unique place amongst its erotic predecessors that gesture toward queerness and homosexuality without committing their narratives to any particular identity. *Teleny* signifies the shift from sexual fluidity that had underscored understandings of sexualities in the Victorian period to the comparatively more rigid and medicalized categorical structures underlying identity categories that would become more familiar in the twentieth century.

What the study of erotic memoirs from the Victorian period can tell us retrospectively about the emergence of self-aware sexualities and the imposition of nomenclature and categories has less to do with copious descriptions of genitals in action and “the wonderful feats of coition some men tell of” (*My Secret Life* 12), though these ought not to be discarded wholesale. Rather, by mixing fact and fiction, the erotic memoir narrativizes that which could not necessarily be discussed openly; this is also the case for other genres of pornography, but the memoir’s claims of authenticity afford the genre a unique position on the boundaries of historical veracity and fiction. The memoir and its readers, then, are collaborators in an alternate version of reality, one that eschews the usual parameters set by social norms and common law to decry and criminalize certain acts, feelings, or urges as unnatural or unacceptably libidinous. Subjects like *The Sins of the Cities of the Plain*’s Jack Saul or *My Secret Life*’s Walter relate more than simply erotic experiences; they are the heroes of their stories. They undermine imposed middle class morality by engaging their desires and wanting for nothing physically, which is even more so the case for Walter than Saul. Where the two heroes differ is in scrutiny of their identities. Saul more precariously straddles the divide between fact and fiction since he – or his name – had a life outside of the erotic memoir and did little to protect the privacy of his confessions, giving foolhardily frank testimony in the Cleveland Street trial.

In terms of authenticity and historical verisimilitude, the erotic memoir has a few precarious problems in maintaining its claims. As has been shown, however, the point of the erotic memoir is not necessarily to be manifestly true or, for that matter, false. If the illusion of truth can be invoked, readers are able to maintain it of their own accord in order to make use of the material for projecting their own fantasies. Erotic memoirs give readers objects of desire while allowing them the privilege of vicariousness. The participatory nature of these memoirs requires readers to enter into an unspoken agreement with the work and its narrative with the understanding that what appears as

fantasy is real, recognizable, and likely accords with the passions of the reader himself. If the experience threatens to become *too* fantastical, the reader has recourse to other, more tangible forms of pleasure in seeing his society refracted within the memoir's broader contexts and he can therefore enjoy the text in a more geographically libidinous fashion. In this way, the reader's engagement in discourse with the text is internal and private, not unlike the individualized experience of reading anything; he may return to the fantasy at any time he chooses, this is the privilege he has paid for. Unlike pornotopia, that un-place of perpetual pleasure without gratification, erotic memoirs can and are contained. In a real sense, they are contained by the reader who may or may not register that what he holds in his hands is a cipher. What is clear, however, is that his control over the text is of the utmost importance.

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