

# ***My Secret Life* and the Sexual Economy of *Fin-de-Siècle* England**

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## **Introduction**

Little is known about *My Secret Life*. Known throughout the text only as ‘Walter’, its protagonist—and thus purportedly its author—lived from about 1820 until at least 1890 (Thomas xxv).<sup>1</sup> The precise details of the first printing and publication of *My Secret Life*, like the author’s identity, are cloaked in secrecy. The full text was published in instalments between 1888 and 1892, ostensibly through the agency of the author’s friend and intermediary, but possibly by Walter himself.<sup>2</sup> The memoirs eventually reached the public domain. Under the title *The Dawn of Sensuality* the first six chapters of Volume One were reprinted and sold in Paris by 1901. By 1902, the full text was reprinted in Paris and was available ‘by post to the English market’ (Thomas xiii). In 1967 it was printed in America and after that time it was freely available in both England and America. Although the diary was obtainable in Britain from the turn of the century, publication was more problematic. When Arthur Dobson attempted to publish the full text of the memoirs in Britain as late as 1969, he was arrested and charged with ‘possessing obscene material for purposes of gain, contrary to Section 2 of the Obscene Publications Act 1959’ (Thomas vi). It was not until 1994 that the full text was legally published in Britain, at last enabling a wider reading and fuller critical appraisal of a book which, Steven Marcus notes, was mainly known by reputation and ‘written about exclusively by those who have not read it’ (77).

Although in 1969 the memoirs were regarded as an obscene publication, they can be read as an important document of sexual history and will be treated as such in this paper. In doing so, it engages with but challenges earlier readings of *My Secret Life*. For example, Jerome Meckier compares the text with Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, deeming it to be ‘an excellent comic and parodic novel’, but not ‘a sociological document’ (68). However Meckier’s comparison is largely unconvincing, as well as being anachronistic, and neglects the memoirs’ multiple purposes: a record, a confession, a reminiscence and a device for the intensification of desire, as ‘Walter’ re-read, edited and was aroused by his own writing. In contrast to Meckier’s assessment, Marcus’s analysis of *My Secret Life* acknowledges the wider dimensions of the document. He spends some time canvassing the social issues which inform the text; for example, ‘the conduct of social hygiene’ and the changes in women’s clothing (98). But according to Marcus, Walter’s focus rests largely on the organization of ‘sexual life in Victorian England’ and in particular ‘the secret life of sexuality which pulsed underneath the world of sexual England as we know it—and as it tended to represent itself to itself’ (99-100). Marcus’s investigation is a valuable starting-point for any study of Walter’s memoirs, but his idea that Walter’s text represented an underworld beneath a more overt world neglects a significant but underexplored aspect of the complete memoirs. What we suggest in this paper is that Walter was not offering a glimpse of the underworld as a distinctive world from a higher layer of Victorian society. Rather, a study of the complete text shows Walter deployed a consistent strategy of neutralizing what he thought of as arguments for chastity, appropriating the language and preoccupations of middle-class respectability and turning them against themselves. Analysis of the complete text in fact shows that

Walter emptied out and rendered meaningless the language of thrift and chastity, relocating it within his own black sexual economy. He did so by juxtaposing the language of household economy and thrift with his own purchase of sexual activity and the spending of semen. It is therefore striking that in the end one of the most prominent juxtapositions is the emptiness and exhaustion of Walter himself with the similarly depleted and worn out purity campaigns of the *fin de siècle*.

This paper locates the author in a 'black' sexual economy, perhaps as one of its most eager participants, but it shows that superimposed on the nexus of sex and money, and closely related to it, is another linkage. What the memoirs clearly demonstrate through Walter's illicit venality is an ineluctable link which he insisted upon as existing between the materialism of *fin-de-siècle* society and the covert 'spermatic economy'. During the final two decades of the nineteenth century the nexus of sex and money, manifested in the commodification of women and the ready availability of prostitutes, removed from the family one of its central roles, 'to anchor sexuality and provide it with a permanent support' (Foucault I, 108). It also indicated the existence, parallel with the cash economy, of the spermatic economy. The doctrine of 'thrift in semen' emphasized the importance of spending this vital fluid in a sensible and prudent manner. By conserving his semen, the middle-class boy would be less likely to compromise 'his intellectual capacity, his moral fiber, and the obligation to preserve a healthy line of descent for his family and his social class' (Foucault I, 121). In essence, he would be avoiding the dangers of degeneracy and a disturbing lack of vigour. More dangerous—for the male and for his society—was the wasteful spending of this precious fluid unproductively on the prostitute, an activity fraught with danger on two counts. First was the risk of contracting a venereal disease from this miasmatic creature, particularly gonorrhea or syphilis. These conditions were perhaps the most dreaded form of depletion and decline. Second was the way in which this reckless act of wilfully incontinent behaviour exhausted and depleted the reserves of the middle-class man, lessening his chances of fathering healthy children.

Not only did the author spend his seed wilfully and wastefully, he also conceived of this expenditure of 'the vital fluid' within the terms of middle-class economic discourse, using, parodying and subverting the language of thrift. Further, this paper will engage with Walter's text as a confessional device, showing it as confession turned against itself. In contrast to warnings that middle-class youth (including Walter) received, *My Secret Life* celebrated the spending of seed and sought to legitimate the transactions of this black economy. Throughout the diary the author did not fundamentally change; rather, the egotism and venality continued, leading to the emptying of his personality. Ultimately, the most telling juxtaposition is the expenditure of both seed and energy; like the *fin de siècle* itself, Walter ends up empty and exhausted.

### **Confession and sites of resistance**

The confessional nature of *My Secret Life* is established by the author's scrupulous, even obsessive, recording of his thoughts and actions. Yet as a 'secret life', details are recorded only to be withheld. Mostly, names of his women are remembered but obliterated by asterisks. Even so, he hopes that enough detail will be transmitted so that participants will recognize themselves: in one case he comments that 'she [a sexual conquest] can't mistake if she reads these pages who it was' (I, 483). From the outset, this is confession inverted and mocked, for the confession glories in the

deviant and indecent as much as it obscures important details. It also expresses the enthusiasm with which Walter wilfully spills his seed and realizes the tension between his conduct and appeals by his contemporaries to normalize sexual conduct. In the Preface to his memoirs, Walter writes: 'I determined to write my private life freely as to fact, and in the spirit of the lustful acts done by me, or witnessed; it is written therefore with absolute truth and without any regard whatever for what the world calls decency. Decency and voluptuousness in its fullest extent cannot exist together, one would kill the other' (I, 6). Elsewhere he confesses, but only to insist upon the normative nature of his experiences: 'it is but a narrative of human life, perhaps the everyday life of thousands, if the confession could be had' (second preface). Walter insists upon not his uniqueness, but the possibility of a more widespread deviance.

*My Secret Life* is located within the confessional mode of Victorian surveillance, but offers little evidence of normalization. In both his sexual activities and his memorialization of them in his text, Walter was part of a society which, so Judith Walkowitz argues, possessed both the urge and the language to place sexuality into public discourse (159). But while Walter contributed to discourses of sexuality, both the secrecy and the intensely private nature of the confession, together with his wilful profligacy and the absence of remorse, defy any notion of social inclusion. At the end of his 'amatory career', Walter writes: 'My deeds leave me no regret—with the exception perhaps of a very few. Would that I were young enough to continue in the same course—that all might happen to me over again' (III, 547). On this point, Walter was assuredly the pupil of De Quincey, the confessional master, whose *Opium Eater* concluded with a similar statement. *My Secret Life* is confession turned against itself. This is one way that Walter can acknowledge his aberrant behaviour and—without expressing remorse—normalize both himself and the sexual economy in which he participates. Towards the end of his life he reminisces:

How similar for the most part have been my temporary amours. How similar the behaviour of the women who have procured me the virgins... What tales they told me of the nascent desires, lewed wishes and erotic knowledge and habits of the girls at that early age, and the encouragement they gave to the males—mostly lads a little older than themselves and of the same class... Given opportunities—who has them like the children of the poor?—and they *will* copulate. It is the law of nature which nothing can thwart. A man need have no 'compunctions of conscience'—as it is termed—about having such girls first, for assuredly he will have done no harm, and has only been an agent in the inevitable (III, p.407-08).

Here Walter both conforms to and parodies the Victorian vigilance societies' injunctions to self-surveillance and on this point he is also consciously overstepping the border-line drawn around young girls by the child cultists (Steedman 62-66; Walvin 123). This is not a displaced or transferred eroticism expressed through a spiritual ideal; it is a straightforward exhortation to physical defilement. Perhaps his comments here are meant to reveal one of his foibles—the compulsion to lie to himself about his clear conscience and his agency in 'the inevitable'—and this indicates the extent to which 'truth-telling' in order to reform is simply alien to his make-up. Walter, after all, is narrator, but judging the extent to which he is narrator as opposed to protagonist is problematic. Throughout the memoirs, despite their confessional mode, he consistently displays a wilfully unregenerate personality,

objectifying women and dehumanizing himself and them as agents of transaction.

### **Victorian principles**

In the last decade covered by the diaries, Walter expresses his awareness of accepted late-Victorian principles and confessional devices as embodied in purity societies and movements, yet he remains apart from society. Partly this separation from society is because his text was scarce. Published in Europe, in either Belgium or the Netherlands, it is likely that 25 copies of the complete text were available after publication, and even then as illicit purchases (Kearney 128). But his apartness from society relates not only to the limited capacity of that society to read of his secret life, but also to his rejection of moral values, 'Prejudice and education in false principles' (III, p.402), as he calls them. This criticism of 'false principles' is significant because of the juxtaposition between overt respectability and his covert impropriety. Although the author compulsively reveals his innermost secrets in his memoirs, he avoids surveillance by carefully hiding his identity and concealing his activities. Yet in expending energy, Walter mirrors the efforts of late-Victorian vigilance societies in monitoring sexual activity in both homes and on the streets, and the efforts of legislators to combat illicit sexual activity, through the Criminal Law Amendment Act and the 1898 Vagrancy Act (Brady 112).

Walter's inversion of commonplace morality is apparent from his earliest years. He was consistently subject to close scrutiny by his family, often urged to disclose the truth, especially about masturbation. Dr John Newman's advice to parents to 'keep [the young] under as close surveillance as possible, without their being aware of your anxiety' merely formalized the unwritten opinions which had, for many years, bolstered middle-class society in the fight against aberrant behaviour (Newman 53). Walter's godfather monitored the youth's behaviour closely; his supervision, however, was underlined by a profound and manifest anxiety (Houghton 63). The godfather's accusation that Walter 'frigged' emphasizes the old man's fear and anger at the same time as it ensured that denial rather than true confession was the most likely response:

He stared hard at me. 'You look ill.' I denied it. He raved out 'No denial, sir, no lies, you have, sir, don't add lying to your bestiality, you've been at that filthy trick, I can see it in your face, you'll die in a mad-house, or of consumption, you shall never have a farthing more pocket-money from me, and I won't buy your commission, nor leave you any money at my death.' I kept denying it, brazening it out. 'Hold your tongue, you young beast, or I'll write to your mother.' That reduced me to a sullen state, only at times jerking out: 'I haven't!' (I, 45).

The determination to lie shows the necessity to conform—at least outwardly—to bourgeois mores. The exchange shows the ambiguous impulses of a society which desired a confession of the sordid details of that which it outwardly loathed and condemned as 'unspeakable'. Walter is also implicated in the 'spermatic' economy as well as the cash economy; as both a young boy and a middle-aged man he 'spends' his semen wastefully, and what his godfather is threatening—to cut the boy out of his will if he contravenes the economy of thrift—demonstrates the way in which cash economy and spermatic economy actually existed in a closely imbricated relationship, one to which the mature Walter would confess but not abandon.

The young Walter's milieu was frequently that part of the city which Peter Stallybrass and Allon White describe as the world of 'drunkenness, noise and obscenity'—the slums, and those areas characterized by louche and perverse behaviour (137). The working-class whore was located within a system of control and subjugation and was aligned with the deviant foreign Other who was part of imperial conquest and possession. Walter was thus the embodiment of an imperial power endlessly enacted through perversion, duplicity, and subjection. A *flâneur*, he loitered in London streets, where the transgression of clearly defined boundaries between the respectable and the disreputable was apparently simple. In about 1870, in a description which could have come from Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor*, he describes how 'one night in Oxford Street' he observed 'the battalion of harlots walking about' (III, 7). In '\*\*\*\*\* Street' shortly afterwards, he saw two 'young, shortish women standing at the corner of a cross street. It was away from any main line of thoroughfare where doxies mostly pick up their friends.' One was obviously gay. Feeling 'larkish', and unwilling to miss an opportunity, he said to her: "'You're pretty, and I should know you again, if I felt you as well as saw you.'"—"You'd better feel me then"' (III, 18). In these encounters, the respectable world is juxtaposed with the disreputable. More than one of Walter's street-side sexual experiences was interrupted by a potent force of authority: a policeman on his rounds. Even here, however, the spending of his seed engaged with exchanges of more mercantile nature: a shilling would purchase a constable's complicity and ensure that he was left undisturbed (I, 700). Indeed, even as the sexual encounter was being played out, Walter is alert to confessional modes, allowing passersby to watch his acts and thus become aware of them. As a policeman passed, Walter muses 'He must have known what we were about, but took no notice' (I, 700).

While maintaining the facade of a middle-class gentleman (a conceit in which others, including deliberately oblivious policemen, were complicit), Walter consorted with women in a wide variety of locations, his sexual activity expedited by his easy familiarity with the city but also taking place alongside the observation by forces of respectable authority. His relationship with lower-class women was complex, but in many ways their attraction resided in their impurity, their inferiority, and even their dirt, as much as in their easy availability and cheapness. When he came across a woman in the 'N.W. of London' his interest was aroused simply because she was at hand; at the same time, he notes her filthy appearance: 'She had a big round black hat on with a huge dirty feather in it... She looked like a woman who sold things in the streets from a barrow. —Was she a coster woman—or a labourer's wife or woman—or low whore? All this passed thro my mind rapidly at my first advance. Then I decided from her laughing and general manner that she was a slut if not a regular strumpet. Lust now made me bolder' (III, 247). In innumerable encounters like this throughout the text, there is a perverse celebration of the proximity of 'sexual channels' and the wastage of sperm on and in women such as these. Many encounters take place almost *in* the gutter. As he ponders on his 'amours' one evening,

I passed some little juvenile punks as I walked thro the Quadrant, and I thought I should like to feel the make of one or two. Three quite little ones passed me together, it was tho [sic] early, dark, and so foggy, that it was possible I might be mistaken. Were they modest or immodest?—I chirped with my tongue, saying in a low tone, —'Come here,' as I passed them and

walked up \*\*\*\* Street.

That street was quiet, I walked quickly on in the fog—heard small feet pattering after me—turned round, and there were two of them. —We could not now see across the road for the fog, which had thickened suddenly, at ten paces I could barely see the outline of any one. A suitable evening for feeling cunts on the Queen's highway (III, 121-2).

That sense of the sexual underground clandestinely moving on, changing its venues and providing endless opportunities for spending seed, is counterpointed by the static character of Walter himself. Exemplified by his single-minded pursuit of sexual experiences and his lack of remorse, but also by his vulnerability, he remains consistent and unreformed throughout the memoirs. Partway through the multiple volumes which comprise *My Secret Life*, he observes: 'And I am middle-aged, and as some would say, should no [sic] better. Bah! —why should I not enjoy myself erotically if I fancy it, even if I were a centenarian' (III, 472). Throughout the memoirs, despite their confessional mode, Walter consistently displays a wilfully unregenerate personality. At this moment, it is useful to lay these memoirs against other overtly erotic but also confessional texts of the period. The anonymous work *Teleny, or The Reverse of the Medal*, published in 1893, is structured as almost a Socratic dialogue, in which the narrator, Camille Des Grieux, is ordered by his interlocutor to 'Tell me your story from its very beginning' (1). Importantly, the narrator of the story remains unchanged in outlook and moral attitudes despite his extended 'confession' of his homosexual affair with the titular character, refusing to condemn sodomy and recalling his liaisons with pleasure (130).

Although Walter's behaviour challenges social norms, he defiantly considers himself guilt-free over his complicity in the sexual economy. Any moments of philosophy justify his acts, but also reveal his secret and enduring fears, especially as they relate to his somatic health. Intermingled with accounts of his exploits are occasional admissions of his physical vulnerability, yet this vulnerability does not encourage him to remove himself from his sexualized milieu. In his fifties, he spent some time at a 'bordel' in Russia. 'The house', he writes, 'was of its class quite a novelty in that place and had been newly started by a French procuress, and such a collection (at a bawdy house) of lovely creatures of different nationalities, I never saw before or since'. He 'selected a most delicious, fresh, beautiful creature and quite young', then 'I had one of those nervousnesses come on of which I have told, coupled with a fear of disease, for I was going to travel where I could get no medical help, and fatigue would increase any ailment I might have' (III, 79). Throughout the memoirs, textual evidence reveals his readiness to live in a world of disease and contagion, his inability to control his 'cod piece' (I, 660), and his willingness to spend his seed in this environment.

### **Materialism and the economy**

More significantly, *fin-de-siècle* society was, at the same time as it promoted respectability, firmly based on grasping material values, and Walter was alert to these. He provides a paramount example of the simultaneous venality and materialism of the era but also illustrates the juxtapositions between his covert activities and the respectable society which contextualizes his sexual life and its written record. Thus he takes on but inverts many of the discursive controls of his society: subject to

surveillance as a child, he later used peepholes to survey others; exhorted by purity campaigners to confess, he did so, but the record of his sexual activity simply aroused him and reinforced his perception of the legitimacy of his actions. In a similar way, Walter locates his secret life within the mercantile imperatives of his society. Operating on many levels of existence, respectable and covert, he recounts his experiences in language which borrows from the realm of middle-class existence. Throughout his text, transactions—the spending of both sperm and money—are moments of potent significance. For some of his sexual partners, money itself was a possibly dangerous force: one girl, Jenny, declared ‘I don’t want your money, I fear it will bring me harm’ (I, 519). Her comments feed into the discourse of the period. In Henry Mayhew’s opinion, the destructive effects of materialism were obvious; he wrote in Volume IV of *London Labour and the London Poor*: ‘Commerce is incontestably demoralizing. Its effects are to be seen more and more every day... seduction and prostitution, in spite of the precepts of the Church, and the examples of her ministers, have made enormous strides in all our great towns within the last twenty years’ (112). Walter’s experiences could almost come from these sociological explorations. For example, his records of payment provide a reminder that all women—but particularly the servants, the prostitutes, and the poor—could be considered as commodities, to be inspected, priced, and then bought. Even kisses carried a value, Walter telling a serving girl that ‘I’ll give you ten shillings for the two [kisses]’ (I, p.540). More significantly, he records that the economic resonances of his actions preoccupied him. To the same girl he offered six pounds in gold, but comments ‘I’m at a loss to know why I pitched upon six pounds, I had intended ten, but cannot tell why I offered that particular sum. I have often thought since of what made me take that economical figure’ (I, 541). ‘Walter’ thus places a price on both the girl and experience.

While it is a commonplace to suggest that women and sex could be commodified in this way, what is not recognized in even the limited scholarship which *My Secret Life* has attracted, is that Walter, in spending his seed as much as his money, developed a complex series of contractual relationships which replicate the language of household economy. This theme runs through his text. He reports that at the Argyle Rooms one night, ‘I saw a well grown, dark, sparkling eyed, dark haired woman, who looked four and twenty, tho but twenty-one years old. Her large breasts and general build told me that her form would please me. I began the mercantile business’ (III, 21). On another occasion, a clearly middle-class woman was purchased, this time with the gift of a pretty watch. Walter was accomplished and familiar with transactions of this nature. ‘Said she, “What can I tell about getting it?” – I have advised several of her sex what lies to tell under similar difficulties’ (III, 47).

Walter thus engages with a mercantile society, his sexual transactions juxtaposing and expressing both the currency and the language of middle-class thrift. However his engagement with this world is complex in expression. Although he is integrated into this materialist system, he impatiently rejects its significance. His text juxtaposes his economic priorities with those of wider society. This aspect of his thought is of major significance to understanding the confessional dimensions of the text and Walter’s own willingness to participate in a ‘black economy’: ‘How absurd’, he writes, is ‘the sentimental bosh about young virgins being bought and sold... [A girl] *will* have her sexual pleasure, paid or unpaid for it’ (III, 293). Walter’s principles were moulded by a mercenary culture that was trying to reconcile the complexities of women—the

purity of middle-class women allied with and conflicting with their physiology, and the ready availability of whores—with the equally complex sexual demands of the middle-class male. The commercial and mercantile nature of his sexuality is emphasized by his constant references to ‘spending’, a word habitually used in the medical and social discourses of the nineteenth century, but seldom used with the same frequency or emphasis as it is in Walter’s memoirs. When he meets ‘a handsome, dark eyed woman of about thirty’, he goes to her room ‘and throwing off my coat and waistcoat I laid myself by the side of her.’ Then: ‘With loving murmurs choked by our mingling, dripping tongues, we spent with passionate transports’ (III, 126-7). This passage is representative of nearly all his encounters with women and underlines his obsessive accounts of ‘spending’ his semen in alleys, streets, fields and in whorehouses throughout England, Europe and the Orient. The Victorian family was valued in social literature as an economic unit as well as an agent for social control, and Walter’s comments, effectively removing economic activity from the family, provide a salient example of his debordering of the language of commerce.

Other texts of the period suggest the economic emphasis of Walter’s narrative, and illuminate the significance of his text in debordering the language of economics. W.T. Stead’s exploration of the ‘London Inferno’ in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 1885 indicated that ‘the violation of virgins’ was commonplace: ‘these virgins are mostly of tender age, being too young in fact to understand the nature of the crime of which they are the unwilling victims’. Pointing to the commercial nature of these transactions, Stead indicated ‘the saleable value of [the] maidenhead.’ ‘Virginity’, he wrote, ‘is a realizable asset’ (3). In the same way as a whore, a virgin was a commodity; but unlike the experienced whore, she was not usually the willing vendor of her wares. Walter’s acquaintance Nelly ‘occasionally had been useful in procuring me amusements’. One day she found for him ‘a nice girl coming as servant “fresh from the country” where she had been nursemaid, and just sixteen years old’. Walter instantly began his business transaction: “‘I’d give you three bright sovereigns to sleep with you” – plunging into business at once’ (III, 51, 53). Displaying a noteworthy conjunction of objectification and savage ritual, he afterwards exults at his triumph: ““You’ve made me bleed,” she whimpered. —“let me get up.” —I wouldn’t, but still partially laying on her, lifted up one of her legs, tugged her drawers up, and put them under her cunt. It was a tough virginity, a bloody sacrifice, scarcely any hymen I’ve slaughtered caused so much blood-letting. Women in this vary much”’ (III, 59). Walter’s sexual encounters are varied, but although he writes at length about the comparative attractions and the reactions of women he encounters, he is also aware of the going rate for these women; their monetary worth also varies. He is prepared to pay three shillings to two ‘little bitches, whose impudence and baudiness were astounding’ (III, 122), although they were ‘certainly not very clean’ (III, 123). But in an extended passage in which Walter discusses value, he makes clear that the value of a grope, an act of indecency, or a sexual act is determined largely by his own satisfaction. Thus ‘My lech was satisfied in ascertaining how small her cunt was’; this pleasure was valued at one shilling (III, 122). For a sexual encounter with two women, but also taking place in ‘the best room’, the price rose to five shillings (III, 123). Even more depraved practices could cost £5 (III, 124). Throughout his descriptions of sexual activity, Walter comments on both the price he pays and the pleasure he receives. A ‘swell brothel’ in a Saxon city costs two thalers; Walter is aware that as a foreigner he is paying a higher tariff, but the quality of the establishment merits this (III, 92). There is little sense in this ‘economy’ of there



being set values, but rather arbitrary values contingent on Walter's level of gratification.

It is not unexpected to find Walter treating women and sexual experiences as tradable commodities. However, an underexplored aspect of his text is the implication of his engagement in the sexual economy. It was in fact highly nuanced. This dimension of this text is little-considered in modern scholarly accounts of *My Secret Life*, but it is striking that both Walter and *fin-de-siècle* society experienced parallel exhaustion. His text is also important for what it reveals of the implications of his engagement in a sexual economy, with his increasing sense of monotony as each transaction supplants the last. With the ambiguity of the erotically abject, he tends more and more towards a voyeuristic detachment which depersonalizes the other and also erases or empties his own identity. At times, Walter attempts to delineate his distinctiveness: 'I have asked a hundred strumpets, and not one but owned that men had used her armpits as a cunt' (III, 29). Generally, however, his identity empties itself out as he spends more and more, as he becomes no more than the observer of various organs, limbs and tableaux. Marcus states that Walter 'is not particularly interested in or attracted by women's faces; it is their bodies, and [their genitals] that draw all his attention' (172). Yet Marcus is only partly right, and again Walter's complexity is apparent. In the Preface to his memoirs he writes: 'Women were the pleasure of my life. I loved cunt, but also who had it; I like the women I fucked and not simply the cunt I fucked, and therein is a great difference. I recollect now in a degree which astonishes me, the face, colour, thighs, backside, and cunt, of every woman I have had, who was not a mere casual, and even of some who were' (I, 7). Walter appreciates women, but his obsessive desire is not for women but for the depersonalized 'body parts' which he has purchased. His examination of these body parts reinforces his impression that he was engaged in mercantile activity: after viewing another couple copulating, the girl 'opened her thighs. Oh accomplished Paphian! and how they like their trade when they succeed' (III, 15).

As his transactions became more monotonous, Walter engaged in scopic activities, and forms of surveillance, intended to stir excitement in his sexual adventures. His desire for the sexual excitement that derives from exploitation is implicit in the many accounts of his voyeuristic experiences. While he deploys a powerful male gaze, obsessively observing female sexual organs, his scopophilia is often characterized by a desire for anonymity. At a German lodging house he pays for the opportunity to observe the 'amatory amusements' of another couple: 'Oh joy! [I] found I could see the lower half of the bed, and a tall handsome fair haired young man standing there, talking to my woman ... [I] could not take my eye from the keyhole... "If you get on a chair you'll see better" – said the Fraulein pointing to the door; and sure enough thro a natural crack high up in an ill made door, I now saw the whole bed.' In situations such as these, Walter is the anonymous gazer, seeing all, almost overcome by these scopophilic delights, but remaining largely unobserved: 'Wild with lust, and not willing to lose any of the spectacle, I beckoned the sister to me, and pulled off the waistcoat as I stood and gave them to her whilst looking still thro the aperture' (III, 15). His actions evoke earlier episodes of voyeurism when he was a child and fascinated by the maidservants: 'I would listen at their door... and began for the first time to peep through peepholes at them' (I, 53). Abjectly, however, Walter is consequently neither inside nor outside the experience. He is in liminal darkness; his identity a vacuum, the sexual experience itself seems cast into a zone of emptiness.

The sense of his controlling, scopic power is undercut by his very anonymity and nothingness. Reading across the volumes of the memoirs, the sense of both his exhaustion and his emptiness becomes strikingly apparent, to an extent hitherto unrecognized. The very sexual transactions intended to excite and arouse become instead part of a monotonous pattern, Walter expending his energies in parallel with the energies his society spent in attempting to regulate and survey.

It is striking that, in his old age, Walter's scopophilia is satisfied by the use of mirrors. At the house of 'the abbess' he meets with 'H', 'Black', and 'Fancy'; they drink large amounts of champagne 'and when we'd finished two bottles we were all ready for any baudiness'. Their relish in this licentious behaviour is enhanced by the opportunity to view themselves: 'Then all stripped to our skin, put the looking glasses so as to reflect us, and in various groupings viewed ourselves. Not a minute were we in the same position, restless latches were in all of us, bums to bellies' (III, 437). In these sexual adventures the author is no longer an unseen voyeur, but he remains in control, directing the tableau. While rejecting the hegemonic controls of his society, he institutes his own jurisdiction. As his tiredness and emptiness come to reflect that of his own society, his own surveillance and control also mimics that of late-Victorian society.

Concomitant with his tiredness and emptiness comes an increased demand for an intensification of desire. Walter's needs are reflected in the steps taken to stimulate his flagging sexuality during his periods of impotence, and the use of alcohol, of multiple partners, and of mirrors is augmented by other activities. Throughout the *fin-de-siècle* period of his diary, when he is experiencing exhaustion and anxiety, Walter's behaviour becomes more obviously perverse, and he begins to more stridently repudiate the normalizing controls of Victorian society, even as he apparently confesses more and more of his behaviour. He acknowledges the 'large variety in my amours, and erotic amusements', commenting on 'the gradual development of abnormal and excentric tastes' (III, 129). His comments bear out Ronald Hyam's observation that the intense focus on sexuality during the *fin de siècle* and the stigma attached to 'unorthodox sexual practices' resulted in increased anxiety 'with a diversion into outright eccentricities, such as flagellation... and sympneumata' (57). He defiantly justifies his deliberate subversion of middle-class mores – and draws attention to the hypocrisy of bourgeois culture—when he comments:

What people do in their privacy is their affair alone. A couple or more together, may have pleasure in that which *others* might call *beastly* — although *beasts* do nothing of the sort—but which to them is the highest enjoyment, physical and mental. It is probable that every man and woman, has some litch which they gratify but don't disclose, yet who would nevertheless call it *beastly*, if told that others did it (III, 190).

And, indeed, in his old age his sexual exploits increasingly demand the stimulation of other participants; his erotic adventures are far from private as he participates in what he describes as 'orgies', in which a 'lewed' and 'salacious quartette' enjoyed themselves with 'luscious games' and 'loud and bawdy talk' (III, 437-8).

Walter's sexual memoirs thus compellingly epitomize the exhaustion of *fin-de-siècle* Britain. They can be read as an integral part of what Elaine Showalter describes as

‘the death throes of a diseased society’, and provide a clear example of ‘the winding down of an exhausted culture’ (1). His experiences appear to represent the low point of modern sexuality in that they are limited by the obsessive need for repetitiveness but also of increasingly eccentric deviations in the midst of these repetitions; there is no sense of continuity and they point nowhere. As limit-experiences they are constrained by the lack of thought which characterizes them and of the economic conceptions which encouraged them. Writing towards the end of his life, Walter comments that he is ‘tired, I suppose, of the spectacles which have so much delighted me. Was this fatigue of travel, satiety—or age?’ (III, 289). Elsewhere he observes that his sexual powers had lessened, and ‘my sins against chastity grow fewer’ (III, 407).

### Conclusion

Middle-class England at the *fin de siècle* was a materialist culture struggling to find a value system; it was characterized by somatic vulnerability and fears of border transgressions. Here the *flâneur* and the whore coexisted with the earnest member of the Vigilance Association. English society set up structures to enforce normative behavior, yet the amatory career of Walter undermined these, finding in the economic and surveillance discourses of middle-class respectability the very language to legitimate his own perversion and to neutralize exhortations to chastity. It is perhaps because of this that *My Secret Life* is such an important *fin-de-siècle* text, imbued as it is with an image of dissipation and the generalized fear of the vulnerability of the English way of life. It tells a story of the conquering bourgeois subject finding power through perverse and disreputable practices. Just as the closing years of Walter’s life were marked by both decreased potency and greater perversion, so too *fin-de-siècle* England was facing a decline in industrial energy and imperial might. *My Secret Life* reveals the confusion and chaos of this society, its perversions, and emptiness. Marked by endless repetitions and constant affirmations of limits, it is a testament to both a man and a society that represented themselves as tired, worn out, with no place to go.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Some scholars speculate that ‘Walter’ was the erotic bibliophile E. Ashbee, but this is a tentative suggestion. Neither are questions of attribution central to this article’s argument. As ‘Walter’s’ modern editor points out, if discovered, ‘Walter’ could be simply someone otherwise unknown. Thomas, Introduction to Vol.II, p.xxvi. On Ashbee’s activities see Iain McCalman, *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p.83.

<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of textual simplicity, the scare quotes around ‘Walter’ will not be used throughout this article.

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