

Sexual Continence
in the Late Nineteenth-Century
Aesthetic Tradition:

Walter Pater, Lionel Johnson, Vernon Lee, and George Moore.

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Introduction

Walter Pater, in his 1889 essay ‘Hippolytus Veiled’ (later to be republished in the posthumous volume *Greek Studies* [1895]), elaborates upon a familiar scene from the Greek myth of Hippolytus and Phaedra. The lustful Phaedra lures the chaste youth Hippolytus into her private chamber – dedicated, as was Athens in general (according to Pater), to the goddess Aphrodite – and attempts to seduce him. ‘You could hardly tell’, Pater writes, ‘where the apartments of the adulteress [Phaedra] ended and that of the divine courtesan [Aphrodite] began’, and ‘a peculiar glow, such as he had never before seen, like heady lamplight, or sunshine to some sleeper in a delirious dream, hung upon the bold, naked, shameful imageries’. Hippolytus is disgusted rather than seduced by Phaedra’s voluptuousness, reacting with a ‘visible, irrepressible dislike’ to a statue of Aphrodite, ‘the almost formless goddess crouching there in her unclean shrine or styè’.¹

We are, one might feel, in familiar territory, where a male writer uses a *femme fatale* to express masculine sexual anxiety.² But such an interpretation does not account fully for Pater’s retelling of the story. Hippolytus does not appear anxious or ‘repressed’, but cheerfully and healthfully celibate: we are told of his ‘invincible happiness’, and that, ‘healthily white and red, he had a marvellous discretion about him’. His sexual abstention provides a certain felicity that suffuses his entire being, and we see him ‘singing always audaciously, so visibly happy, occupied, popular’.³

Phaedra is at first attracted by his reluctance – ‘Ah! it was that very reluctance that

¹ Walter Pater, ‘Hippolytus Veiled: A Study From Euripides’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 60:358 (August, 1889), 294-306, 304; later published in *Greek Studies: A Series of Essays*, ed. Charles L. Shadwell (London: Macmillan, 1895), 156-93.

² For the *femme fatale* as an exploration of masculine sexuality in the late nineteenth century, see Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³ Pater, ‘Hippolytus Veiled’, 304, 301, 302.

chiefly stirred her' – but becomes increasingly frustrated as it emerges that, as a devotee of Aphrodite, she lacks available categories through which to make sense of him. She tries first to account for his lack of interest in sex through a narrative of arrested development: 'Is he indeed but a child still', she wonders, 'to be a child always?' Then, as if this explanation were immediately unsatisfactory, she asks whether he might be a 'wily priest'? This second narrative involves an attempt to understand Hippolytus as 'skilfully circumventing her sorceries, with mystic precautions of his own'; as a variation of her own behaviour instead of something alien. To a nineteenth-century reader it may also have suggested an anachronistic anti-Catholicism, as the phrase 'wily priest' imitates the rhetoric of deviousness and hypocrisy commonly used to denigrate Catholic priestly celibacy.⁴ Traditionally Phaedra is driven mad by her lustfulness, whether inherent or Goddess-imposed. But in Pater's retelling of the myth it is her inability to comprehend a lack of sexual appetite that causes Phaedra's insanity, rather than her own frustrated desire. Her failed attempts at understanding, at categorization, finally drive Phaedra into a 'bodily sickness at last, [...] her thoughts running madly on what she fancies to be his secret business'. She tells her husband 'a false story of violence to her bed', and this story too can be read as a further attempt at understanding, in which celibacy is interpreted as a suppressed sexuality that gathers violence in the suppression and must inevitably break out in time.⁵

Pater's retelling of the Hippolytus myth plays with the difficulty that late nineteenth-century British Protestant culture sometimes had in conceptualizing genuine restraint of the sexual instinct in anything other than negative terms: as evidence of perverse or pathological lack; as disease, immaturity, or inhumanity. The

⁴ *Ibid.*, 304. See D. G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 275.

⁵ Pater, 'Hippolytus Veiled', 304-05.

weight of this criticism, however, relies upon the familiarity of many of his readers with an alternative mode of being. In describing Hippolytus, Pater also shows how sexual abstention might form a significant part of a healthy life, how it can enhance the individual's experience of the world, as well as their relationship with the society of which they are inevitably a part. This study explores a particular late nineteenth-century manner of conceiving such positive, productive 'sexual continence'; a term I follow nineteenth-century writers in preferring to the more morally inflected 'virginity', 'celibacy', or 'abstinence', to refer to both temporary and permanent states of abstention from *all* manifest sexual activity, whether the activity abstained from is auto- or alloerotic, homo- or heterosexual.

Though Hippolytus is seemingly impervious to sexual pleasures, he has intensely pleasurable encounters with nature and with literature. He learns rapturously about his own chosen goddess, Artemis, from 'a book for the delighted reading of a scholar, willing to ponder at leisure, to make his way surely, and understand', and spends euphoric 'nights on the mountains' in worship.⁶ And Pater emphasizes the general social success that his continence inspires: people 'instinctively admired his wonderful placidity, and would fain have shared its secret, as it were the carelessness of some fair flower upon his face'. There is even a suggestion that his very lack of sexual activity creates a mysterious connection between him, the natural world, and the rest of mankind, as we are told that 'his continual singing', was 'like the earth itself made audible in all its humanities'.⁷ Though Hippolytus does reach his usual violent ending in this retelling, Pater allows this violence to be interpreted as the result of a failure of others to understand, rather than inherent unworthiness.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 299, 302.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 302, 301.

The present thesis makes two main arguments. More generally, its purpose is to suggest that the idea of a productive sexual continence like that of Pater's Hippolytus pervaded Victorian culture, as it had the majority of cultures that came before it, despite the co-existence of contradictory ideas such as those represented by Pater's Aphroditean Athens. Ignoring the prevalence of this idea, I argue, risks distorting the sexual history, and in the process other histories, of that culture. Secondly, and in illustration of this point, it enquires into the place or value of such sexual continence within the intellectual culture of late nineteenth-century Aestheticism, as part of the impulse to reconcile aesthetics and ethics, or to conceptualize an aesthetic mode of life. This enquiry is carried out in relation to the work of four representative Aesthetic writers: Walter Pater, Lionel Johnson, Vernon Lee, and George Moore.

Aestheticism was not a purely intellectual movement; it was a complex, many-sided phenomenon with sociological, emotional, psychological, physical, and economic aspects. In approaching Aestheticism as if it were what Talia Schaffer has called 'a philosophical movement indebted to Ruskin and Pater', I do not mean permanently to limit critical focus to a 'small clique'.⁸ I contend, however, that *thinking* about sexuality does, in the Victorian period and elsewhere, play a part in intellectual culture, including specifically that of the Aesthetic Movement, in ways not yet accounted for. My attention is therefore to what Arnold I. Davidson calls 'styles of reasoning' about sexuality: the manner in which it is represented, and the relationships drawn between it and other things, rather than the desires, pleasures, eroticism, or affective states that inform and shape texts, or the particular sexual

⁸ Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 2.

identities that they may reveal.⁹ In the process I attend to the boundary of sexual activity as a point of sexual difference, rather than the more commonly interrogated boundary of sexual object, whether hetero- and homosexual.

The result of this enquiry has been that, while its ostensible subject has always been a specific sexual discourse, this has come to be a thesis about the intersection of many ideas present in Victorian culture. It has come to be about the relationships that aesthetes posited between sensuous experience and sensuality; about the efforts that so many writers made to reconcile the competing claims of the individual and society, the desire for self-cultivation and the sense of social responsibility; about their frequent elaboration of the idea of ‘love’, not as a possessive desire for another person, but as an ideal, disinterested attitude towards all things; and, perhaps more than anything, about the constant connections that they made between ethics and everything else, treating all ideas, at least in theory, as part of the process of living rather than as mere abstract concepts. These ideas were common in nineteenth-century writing; but the ideological nexus that they create with ideas of sexual continence within late-Victorian Aestheticism has not previously been described.

‘Anybody who studies the moods and thoughts of the Eighteen Nineties cannot fail to observe their central characteristic in a widespread concern for the correct – that is, the most effective, the most powerful, the most righteous – mode of living.’¹⁰ So wrote Holbrook Jackson in one of the earliest studies of the late nineteenth century as a period. There is some truth in this characterization of the era in which Aestheticism flourished – extendable so as to include the whole final quarter of the nineteenth century – as one that saw a significant proliferation of conscious

⁹ Arnold I. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), xii.

¹⁰ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Grant Richards, 1913), 12.

ethical discourse. When it came to the relationship between art and beauty on the one hand, and the way in which one lives one's life, on the other, there were a great many different ethical possibilities, within which several coherent traditions may be determined.¹¹ One way in which these ethical alternatives can be categorized is according to the manner in which the sexual life in particular was represented as interacting with a life to which art and beauty were held to be important. Of these 'options' perhaps the most familiar (because most prevalent today) are those in which the aesthetic or artistic life was associated with a positive, active, or liberated sexuality, this being occasionally in turn associated with social transgression or political radicalism. Francis Galton appealed to this widespread view of the artist's sexuality in his study *Hereditary Genius* (1862):

The Poets and Artists generally are men of high aspirations, but, for all that, they are a sensuous, erotic race, exceedingly irregular in their way of life. Even the stern and virtue-preaching Dante is spoken of by Boccaccio in most severe terms. Their talents are usually displayed early in youth, when they are first shaken by the tempestuous passion of love.¹²

The idea of a close relationship between sexuality and art found deliberately incendiary expression in Grant Allen's 1894 essay 'The New Hedonism'. Having proclaimed (in a manner recognizable from Protestant anti-Catholic rhetoric) that 'the unclean and impure things are celibacy and asceticism', he then takes this familiar idea to provocative extremes:

everything high and ennobling in our nature springs directly out of the sexual instinct [...]. To it we owe the evolution of music, of poetry, of romance, of

¹¹ Ruth Livesey has illustrated the tension between socialist and individualist aestheticisms in the period; see *Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain, 1880-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

¹² Francis Galton, *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into its Laws and Consequences* (London: Macmillan, 1869), 225.

belles lettres; the evolution of painting, of sculpture, of decorative art, of dramatic entertainment. To it we owe the entire existence of our aesthetic sense, which is, in the last resort, a secondary sexual attribute.¹³

This aesthetic-sexual discourse had strong roots, though always co-existent with alternative models. Andrew Elfenbein, in his work on eighteenth-century romantic conceptions of genius (particularly artistic genius), has described the ‘two models for genius’ that had arisen by the beginning of the nineteenth century: the anti-domestic, sexually transgressive genius, and the solitary, ascetic, sexually disinterested genius.¹⁴ The first of these was the more common, and evolved from the notion of the genius as someone who was both entirely original and, in Elfenbein’s account, ‘sublime’, the latter quality being closely associated with excess. The original and sublime geniuses were those who ‘refused all boundaries and became laws unto themselves’, and ‘existed to let the reading public experience vicariously what it would never know in real life’. Further, ‘no arena was more open to experiment than sexual desire’.¹⁵ Elfenbein posits this sexually transgressive genius, epitomized in the scandalous Byron, as ‘the prehistory of a homosexual role’, since the search for the ultimate transgression led Romantic artists to deviant sexuality. This artistic type may also be considered a part of the ‘prehistory’ of the wider nineteenth-century discourse that presumes a connection between artistic vocations and transgressive or excessive sex, as seen in Galton’s and Allen’s discussions of art and the poet.

But then there was also the second model of the romantic genius, what Elfenbein calls ‘the ascetic image of a poet’s Hippolytus-like indifference to women’.¹⁶ Associated more with Wordsworth than Byron, this idea of the continent

¹³ Grant Allen, ‘The New Hedonism’, *Fortnightly Review*, 55:327 (March, 1894), 376-92; 391, 384.

¹⁴ Andrew Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 30, 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

genius also had a strong influence on nineteenth-century conceptions of the aesthete, as we saw in the case of Pater's *Hippolytus*. Alongside the Byronic sexual-aesthetic discourse, and often even within the same individual, or indeed the same piece of writing or art work, there existed this other discursive possibility in which art, and particularly aesthetic living, was associated with a productive ideal of reserve, restraint, and austerity. Within this model sexual continence was often imagined, not only as an example of self-discipline, but also as a productive practice that in itself contributed either to the creation of artworks, or to an aesthetic mode of life. For instance, in George Bernard Shaw's early novel *Love Among the Artists* (written c. 1880, published 1900), which presents a muddle of competing sexual-artistic discourses, it is said of the actress Madge that 'passion and poetry' are 'conditions of her full efficiency as an actress'; and yet she herself 'rather pitied her married colleagues, knowing perfectly well that they were not free to be so fastidious, reserved, and temperate as her instincts told her a great artist should always be'.¹⁷ Galton attempts to reconcile and rationalize these co-existent discourses. He continues the passage quoted above, writing that though the poet is undeniably sensual, nonetheless 'poets are clearly not founders of families'.¹⁸ Elfenbein finds similar claims in eighteenth-century treatises on genius, where they imply a wildness of character not fit for domesticity.¹⁹ For Galton, however, the reason for such incompatibility is this:

To be a great artist, requires a rare and, so to speak, unnatural correlation of qualities. A poet, besides his genius, must, at the same time, have the severity and stedfast [sic] earnestness of those whose dispositions afford few

¹⁷ George Bernard Shaw, *Love Among the Artists* (London: John Murray, 2012; first published 1900; written c.1880), 159-60.

¹⁸ Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, 227.

¹⁹ Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius*, 32.

temptations to pleasure, and he must, at the same time, have the utmost delight in the exercise of his senses and affections.²⁰

The successful poet and artist for Galton was not only a sensual character, but one also who must exercise the utmost discipline over himself in order to turn such impulses into lasting artistic form: too much discipline, it is implied, to allow even the pleasures of married life.

For many in the period such restraint and discipline, especially for the ‘great artist’ or genius, required at least temporary sexual continence. To a certain extent, this continence can be justified as a negative rejection of domesticity as an environment uncongenial to artistic creation. But there was also a positive element of this vision, of something to be actively gained from a sexually continent state. This version of aesthetic sexual ethics was in itself part of a much wider discourse, in which sexual continence was associated with intellectual or spiritual gain. In most instances this gain is figured as not in itself sexual, and as having positive implications either for the individual or for society (in most cases both). An example can be found in Robert Bridges’ *The Testament of Beauty* (1929). ‘Celibat lives’, writes Bridges, ‘are led / without impoverishment of intellect or will’. In some cases, he continues:

virginity may seem a virile energy
in its angelic liberty, prerequisite
to the perfection of some high personality.²¹

The Testament of Beauty was a culmination of the artistic and sexual sensibility that Bridges spent the latter half of the nineteenth century evolving. Bridges had trained as a physician in the 1860s, and in many ways his conception of the body remained

²⁰ Galton, *Hereditary Genius*, 227.

²¹ Robert Bridges, *The Testament of Beauty* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929), 76 [book 3, lines 329-30, 332-34]. The author’s eccentric system of orthography is preserved.

Victorian (the significance of which will be explored in Chapter One). A similar survival can be seen in the work of George Moore and Vernon Lee, who continued to express an arguably outdated idea of bodily function well into the twentieth century.

Comparable statements can be found throughout nineteenth-century literature, and not only from England. In the vastly popular *Walden* (1854), Henry David Thoreau writes:

The generative energy, which, when we are loose, dissipates and makes us unclean, when we are continent invigorates and inspires us. Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it.²²

Both Bridges and Thoreau frame their statements with Christian sentiment: the latter continues, ‘Man flows at once to God when the channel of purity is open. By turns our purity inspires and our impurity casts us down’.²³ Yet in the same paragraph, and in support of the same argument, Thoreau quotes also from ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius, and from what he calls ‘the Ved’, presumably the Buddhist Vedas, a body of ancient texts originating from the Indian subcontinent. This is not a discourse that originates in Britain in the nineteenth century; it is a manner of conceiving the sexual body that can be found in most world cultures, as part of widely differing conceptions of the body as a whole, and with an enormous range of associated cultural values and meanings.

Another example can be found in Tolstoy’s famously pessimistic novella *The Kreutzer Sonata* (1889), where the protagonist Pózdnyshév expresses his theories on sexuality in a way that suggests a similar model of productive continence. He complains, in a manner close to that of Tolstoy’s philosophic work of the 1890s, that

²² Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. J. Lyndon Shanley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971; first published 1854), 219-20.

²³ *Ibid.*, 220.

the luxury of modern living has led to the cultivation of an unbridled and profoundly damaging sexuality. ‘Our stimulating super-abundance of food, together with complete physical idleness, is nothing but a systematic excitement of desire’. He then introduces an idiosyncratic model of body function in which the ‘safety-valve’ of sexual activity can be employed to prevent such arousal from damaging the health: ‘if it does go [to sexual activity] and the safety-valve is open, all is well’, at least with the individual. The result, however, is an abundance of sexual activity of which the narrator, like Tolstoy, disapproves. Sexual continence, on the other hand – that is, the closing of the safety valve – creates a state of tension in which the excessive sensual energy is redirected to create a seemingly spiritual state of intensity:

try and close the safety-valve, as I closed it temporarily, and at once a stimulus arises which, passing through the prism of our artificial life, expresses itself in utter infatuation, sometimes even platonic.²⁴

This account deals with a situation in which there is an excess of sensuality due to early sexual corruption. In his non-fiction Tolstoy outlined a positive model of how a more permanent sexual continence, by nullifying sexual desire, could become a positive force in an ideal life. In an 1890 essay entitled ‘A Reply to Critics of “The Kreutzer Sonata”’, first published in English translation in the short-lived English periodical *The Universal Review*, he promised to offer ‘in plain and simple language my own views on the subject handled in the story’. He confirmed his feeling that the obsession with love and sex in Western societies meant that ‘the best energies of our men and women are drawn forth and exhausted during the most promising period of life’. In contrast, he recommended an abstemious life combined with strong exercise.

²⁴ Leo Tolstoy, ‘The Kreutzer Sonata’, trans. Aylmer Maude, in *Tolstoy Centenary Edition*, vol. 16 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 109-231; 133.

‘No one need go far’, he wrote, ‘in search of proofs that this kind of abstemious living is not merely possible, but far less hurtful to health than excess. Hundreds of instances are known to every one’. Such abstemiousness, he made clear, involved a strict sexual continence both outside and inside of marriage, with sexual relations limited to reproductive acts.²⁵

Tolstoy assumes throughout his writing that the majority of people in the societies for which he was writing (middle-class Russian and European) lived a life of excessive sensuality, unaware of the benefits of the austere life he recommended. Yet his theories are based on a model of the sexual body that dominated medical opinion in the nineteenth century throughout Europe and beyond. Systems built upon this model, of which there were many variations, relied on the idea that sexual activity involved a loss of something, the retention of which was beneficial to the rest of the body and even the mind. Some of these medical theories, and their impact upon public conceptions of sexuality, will be explored in Chapter One. This understanding of how the sexual body works was primarily rooted in experience of the male rather than female body; though that has not prevented its frequent application to the latter, by women as well as men. In its more anatomical forms, it pivots upon the sense that semen is a precious substance, and that not only is its loss weakening to the body as a whole, but its retention might in some way actively increase one’s health or wellbeing.

There has, therefore, often been close interaction between these theories and a culture’s constructions of gender, particularly masculinity. Writing based on a regulative model of the sexual body has often reproduced and reinforced negative ideas concerning female sexuality, both in medical contexts and in the wider cultures

²⁵ Leo Tolstoy, ‘Marriage, Morality, and Christianity: A Reply to Critics of “The Kreutzer Sonata”’, trans. E. J. Dillon, *The Universal Review*, 7:26 (June, 1890), 154-62; 154, 157, 155.

to which it has contributed. This interaction can be clearly seen in *The Kreutzer Sonata*. Though it is implied that the continent life is ideal, one may nevertheless suspect that this ideal is more easily achievable by men than women. Against the idea that continence is the natural state for men, though they are often early ‘debauched’, Pózdnyshév posits a theory of the original animal sensuality of *all* women: ‘A woman [...] knows very well that all the talk about elevated subjects is just talk, but that what a man wants is her body and all that presents it in the most deceptive but alluring light; and she acts accordingly’.²⁶ A softer form of this gendering can be seen in *The Testament of Beauty*, where the quotation given above can be found within a larger section that takes as its subject the sexual difference between men and women. ‘The allure of bodily beauty is mutual in mankind’, muses Bridges, ‘As is the instinct of breed, which tho’ it seem i’ the male / more activ, is i’ the female more predominant’. Therefore, while successful and healthy celibate lives can be lived by both genders, yet ‘this thing is rare in women, whereas in the man / virginity may seem a virile energy’, and so on.²⁷ Far from the common association of virginity and chastity with women, Bridges allows men almost exclusive access to a particular type of productive sexual continence.

The writers I examine here, both male and female, also tend to gender disciplined control as masculine, and soft looseness as feminine, in a tradition that reaches back at the very least to the gender politics of ancient cultures.²⁸ The attitudes and practices associated with sexual continence played a crucial role in the construction of many styles of nineteenth-century masculinity, including that of the male artist. James Eli Adams in *Dandies and Desert Saints* (1995) has explored the

²⁶ Tolstoy, ‘Kreutzer Sonata’, 132.

²⁷ Bridges, *The Testament of Beauty*, 76, [book 3, lines 325-27, 331-32].

²⁸ See Catherine Edwards, *The Politics of Immorality in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 63-97.

relevance of concepts such as reserve and restraint to the gender performances of nineteenth-century writers, and has found the work of writers as disparate as Carlyle and Pater to ‘lay claim to the capacity for self-discipline as a distinctly masculine attribute and in their different ways embody masculinity as a virtuoso asceticism’, while Herbert Sussman’s *Victorian Masculinities* (1995) has illustrated the importance of mainstream medical discourse to the understanding of how nineteenth-century artists conceived of their profession both as a sexual practice and a style of masculinity.²⁹ Despite this association between the self-control and discipline needed for sexual continence and masculinity, however, many women drew on similar sexual discourses to theorize their own aesthetic ethics beyond the empty negativity of purity and innocence often attributed to feminine virginity, as is seen in the case of Vernon Lee. Though this thesis does not focus exclusively upon gender, there is ample scope for expansion in this direction, especially concerning the role of this discourse in thinking about the relationship between female reproduction and creativity.

Nineteenth-century Aesthetic writers commonly concerned themselves with ethical as well as artistic questions; as Sara Lyons puts it, ‘Aestheticism had ambitions to be not simply a philosophy of beauty but a philosophy of happiness’, and this was true whether its proponents wrote criticism, poetry, fiction, or in some cases letters, though the solutions they presented to these questions varied.³⁰ This ethical concern was partly with what Foucault calls ‘arts of existence’ or ‘techniques of the self’, an effort on the part of writers ‘to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain

²⁹ James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 2; Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³⁰ Sara Lyons, *Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater: Victorian Aestheticism, Doubt, and Secularisation* (London: Legenda, 2015), 9.

aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria'.³¹ I will return to this similarity between Foucauldian *ethic* and aesthetic ethics in Chapter Two. Nineteenth-century Aesthetic writers were often, however, also closely concerned with the relationship between self and society. Ruth Livesey has recently examined the conjunction between Aestheticism and socialism, their common attachment to a 'productive, communal ideal of art' at the end of the century, while Matthew Potolsky has proposed that decadence, usually envisioned as a movement of dissolution and radical individualism, also involved the creation of 'a transformatively "modern community"'.³² The writers I examine here are among those whose work suggests a sustained engagement with questions of aesthetic ethics concerning both the individual and social relations; though their approaches vary from Pater's and Moore's (very different) interest in what the universal and communal can contribute to individual self-cultivation, to the strict sense of responsibility for the lives of others that motivated Johnson and Lee. I use the word 'ethics' in this thesis to refer to both of these concerns, though not always necessarily both at the same time, and I indicate where this is the case.

The texts on which I focus, whether or not explicitly involved with ethical argument, were generally received and criticized as ethical pronouncements, as statements concerning the most desirable ordering of life, including sexual life. In a society in which, as Regenia Gagnier has shown, new theories of individualism were emerging from all points on the political spectrum, an anxiety emerged concerning

³¹ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1992; this translation first published 1985; originally published in French as *L'Usage des plaisirs*, 1984), 10-11.

³² Livesey, *Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism*, 4; Matthew Potolsky, *Decadent Republic of Letters: Taste, Politics, and Cosmopolitan Community from Baudelaire to Beardsley* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2012), 9.

‘individual development threatening the functioning of the whole’.³³ Negative responses to Aesthetic writing (and writers) focused upon two points: excessive sensuality, and excessive individualism or selfishness, which together were represented as especially detrimental to society. The connection of these putative failings was commonplace at this point in history, and can arguably be attributed to the residue of the eighteenth-century moral code that has been called ‘civic humanism’, in which personal moderation was associated with social good, and personal excess with social dissolution; itself deeply rooted in long-standing connections between sexual behaviour and social order.³⁴ When Robert Buchanan, for example, castigated what he called ‘the fleshly school of poetry’ – for him exemplified by Baudelaire and Gautier in France, and Swinburne and Dante Gabriel Rossetti in England – for ‘its sickliness and effeminacy’, he accused its proponents of being ‘equally self-indulgent and sensual’. Even, he laments, if there were ‘an edict ordering the destruction of all *looking-glasses*’, yet ‘some Simple Simon of the amatory type’ would be found ‘filling the family washing-tub with water from the pump, and pining away into a shadow for love of his own image hovering therein!’³⁵ This double disease, of ‘animalism’ and ‘eternal posturing before the mirror’, in which the one is readily imaginable as entailing the other, is threatening to society at large; its writers are ‘public offenders, because they are diligently spreading the seeds of disease broadcast wherever they are read and understood’.³⁶ Five years later, W. H.

³³ Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of the Part to the Whole, 1859-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 3.

³⁴ For ‘civic’ and ‘civil humanism’ as moral codes, see J. G. A. Pocock, *Virtue, Commerce, and History: Essays on Political Thought and History, Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). For the application of these codes to gender and sexuality, see Elfenbein, *Romantic Genius*, 20-27. For its residual influence upon nineteenth-century sexual discourse, see Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 1-31.

³⁵ Robert Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry: And Other Phenomena of the Day* (London: Strahan, 1872), 70, 19, 90, 91.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, ix, 90, 33.

Mallock also coupled selfish individualism and sensuality in the character of Mr. Rose, a parody not only of Pater but also of a particular way of reading his work. We are told of Mr. Rose that ‘his two topics are self-indulgence and art’, but the two themes upon which his talk actually hinges are the individual and sensual love.³⁷ He soliloquizes on ‘the new pleasures that modern culture has made possible for us’, especially ‘the passion of love, in its distinctly modern form’, and also proclaims that he looks ‘upon social dissolution as the true condition of the most perfect life. For the centre of life is the individual, and it is only through dissolution that the individual can re-emerge’.³⁸ By the time of Robert Hichens’ *The Green Carnation* (1894), which satirized the Decadence of the 1890s, the parody aesthete was quickly recognizable in his mixture of self-obsessed individualism and sensuality. Of Reggie Hastings, supposedly modelled on Alfred Douglas, Hichens writes both that ‘the white flower of a blameless life was much too inartistic to have any attraction for him’, and that ‘he knew that he was great, and he said so often in Society’.³⁹ Though these are arguably all attacks aimed at specific individuals, the similarity of their construction reveals a recognizable set of anxieties through which the Aesthetic Movement was commonly represented.

Some Aesthetic writers used this association between sensuality and selfishness to construct a socially critical position, affecting a deliberately cultivated sensuality at least in part as a protest either against a particular state of society, or to the idea of social interference in the world of art in general. Livesey, for example, finds this conjunction of values in much aesthetic-socialist writing of the period, such as that of Edward Carpenter and Olive Schreiner; while writers whom we would now

³⁷ [W. H. Mallock], *The New Republic: Or, Culture, Faith, and Philosophy in an English Country House*, 2 vols (London: Chatto and Windus, 1877), vol. 1, 24.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, 101, 178; vol 1., 78.

³⁹ [Robert Hichens], *The Green Carnation* (London: Heinemann, 1894), 5, 3.

call Decadent – Wilde, Frederick Rolfe (Baron Corvo), and (despite his inclusion in this thesis) Moore – frequently engaged in a similar sensual individualism, though these as often affected aristocratic as socialist politics, as in Moore’s outcry in the semi-autobiographical *Confessions of a Young Man* (1888): ‘That some wretched farmers and miners should refuse to starve, that I may not be deprived of my *demi-tasse* at *Tortoni*’s; that I may not be forced to leave this beautiful retreat, my cat and my python – monstrous’.⁴⁰ This sensual-individualist Aestheticism has occasionally been treated as though it encompassed the entire movement. Dennis Denisoff, for instance, describes ‘decadence and aestheticism’ as essentially ‘anti-conformist’, its writers ‘flaunting their dissident passions before the British public’; while Dustin Friedman writes that Aestheticism was ‘a late nineteenth-century cultural movement consisting of writers and artists’ who insisted ‘on art’s intrinsic value apart from any moral, didactic, or utilitarian function’, and also ‘on the vital relationship between artistic experience and homoerotic desire’.⁴¹

Another ethical approach is discernible in Aesthetic writing, in which a productive ideal of sexual continence deflected charges of both excessive sexuality and excessive individualism. As the following chapter shows, continence has a long history of association with social usefulness; not only in a negative sense in which one’s sensuality is suppressed for the greater good of a society built upon family and marriage ties, but also as a constructive behaviour in its own right, imagined as somehow enhancing one’s personal potential for sociability. For Aesthetic writers, it also had the ability to connect this sociability with a non-sensual position that

⁴⁰ Livesey, *Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism*, *passim*; George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*, 2nd ed. (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1889), 200.

⁴¹ Dennis Denisoff, ‘Decadence and Aestheticism’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 31-52, 31; Dustin Edward Friedman, *Erotic Negativity and Victorian Aestheticism, 1864-1896*, unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of California, Los Angeles, 2012), 1.

nevertheless did not sacrifice intense sense experience. In his *Memoirs* John Addington Symonds remembers that in his youth he thought that he ‘had transcended crude sensuality through the aesthetic idealization of erotic instincts’.⁴² Though he later came to repudiate this possibility, he represents it as a plausible position at the time. In the chapters that follow, I argue that there existed an Aesthetic tradition which distinguished between sensuousness and sensuality; a subtle distinction but perhaps more obvious to nineteenth-century readers than those of the twenty-first century. The distinction was more one of attitude than behaviour, in the first instance: sensuousness, the intense and pleasurable experience of the external world via the senses, could be separated at least intellectually from sensuality, the approach to such experience in an excessive, selfish, or lustful manner. It was often represented as an uneasy, unstable distinction, but it was nevertheless integral to much nineteenth-century ethical thinking about art and beauty both within and outside of the Aesthetic Movement. In adopting this position an Aesthetic writer could benefit particularly from the productive model of sexual continence, as it could be imagined as intensifying sensuousness almost infinitely, without such sense experience becoming excessive, and sensual. Combined with the supposed sociability of continence, an aestheticism could thus be theorized that would be both socially and personally satisfying.

This formula would not, of course, have held water with all Victorian audiences. Sexual continence had a fraught history in Victorian England. Abstinence was at least superficially expected before marriage, especially among the middle-classes (though such expectations may have been more easily waived in the case of men than women). But continence freely chosen (even temporarily) as an alternative

⁴² John Addington Symonds, *Memoirs*, ed. Phyllis Grosskurth (London: Hutchinson, 1984), 96.

to marriage had been held in suspicion since the Reformation as an essentially Catholic sentiment. ‘Anti-Catholics’, writes D. G. Paz, ‘assumed as a given that celibacy, being unnatural, was a front for lascivious behaviour’.⁴³ Katherine Snyder has shown how deeply entrenched was the ambivalence of Victorian England towards bachelors as ‘both admirable and contemptible, enviable and execrable, dangerous and defanged’. ‘Often seen by their contemporaries as disruptive to domestic life’, she says, they were potentially sexual and thus representing all the dangers of prostitution, corruption of the young, and sexually transmitted disease; and yet there was a sense too that their potential sexlessness was itself threatening, undermining the reproductive imperative at the heart of Protestantism, and, especially later in the century, potentially endangering the race.⁴⁴ This was true also for women who deliberately chose to remain unmarried. Though they were less immediately associated with sexual threat, yet their choice seemed to some to undermine social values, especially later in the century when politically active women often worked sexual continence into ‘a complex philosophy of sex, designed to show both how women’s subjugation had originated and how women were maintained in subjection to men from day to day’ (cf. 70).⁴⁵ This element of compulsory sexuality in Victorian society, however, should not be treated as though it were thoroughly dominant, with all other discourses identifiable as radical or socially dissident. As Lesley Hall has argued, nineteenth-century Britain was ‘a complex society containing a plethora of social and economic groups with very different ideologies. Too often historians have

⁴³ Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism*, 275.

⁴⁴ Katherine V. Snyder, *Bachelors, Manhood and the Novel, 1850-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

⁴⁵ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (London: Pandora Press, 1985), 27.

given exaggerated attention to a single strand'.⁴⁶ Victorian sexual 'normativity' was not limited to Protestant reproductive marriage. Though it was perhaps to a certain extent organized around that core, its borders were wider and more fluid than has sometimes been assumed. Ideals of sexual continence could be found at all points on the political spectrum in the late nineteenth century, from radical to ultra-conservative, so that the presence of such ideas is not alone enough to diagnose the political orientation of a writer or mode of thought, as Chapter One will show.

Within the Aesthetic Movement, productive ideals of sexual continence were almost always associated with Pater. Pater's legacy to the late nineteenth-century Aesthetic Movement was double-edged. Recent Paterian scholars have almost universally attended to one particular aspect of this legacy, in which his emphasis on sense experience and what could be interpreted as radical individualism ('What is this song or picture [...] to *me*?')⁴⁷ were adopted as philosophical supports to an already extant Aestheticism that ran its sensuousness into sensuality, and found in such phrases as 'stirring of the senses' and 'exquisite passion' a justification for what one contemporary essayist called the 'deification of the flesh'.⁴⁸ Frank Harris remembered that, as a young man, he had 'met an Oxford graduate' who 'preached Pater, Pater unregenerate, Pater the Pagan. He showed me long passages of Pater's essays on the "Renaissance" and I went down before him'.⁴⁹ Readers of Harris's famously explicit autobiographies will have no trouble recognising the tongue-in-cheek sexual reference

⁴⁶ Lesley A. Hall, 'Sexual Cultures in Britain: Some Persisting Themes', in *Sexual Cultures in Europe: National Histories*, eds Franz X. Eder *et al.* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 29-52.

⁴⁷ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980; first published 1873), xix-xx, 189.

⁴⁸ W. S. Lilly, 'The New Gospel', *Time*, 1 (May, 1879), 169-75; 175.

⁴⁹ Frank Harris, 'Walter Pater', in *Contemporary Portraits: Second Series* (New York: Frank Harris, 1919), 203-26; 203.

in his final phrase here.⁵⁰ Edgar Jepson also, reminiscing about his time as an undergraduate in Oxford in the 1880s, remembered:

I would read Pater, slowly, till I had finished my pipe, then stroll up to the market to buy some flowers, for the Aesthetic Movement was waxing to its height, and I wore my hair rather long and was striving, as Pater prescribed, to become a monochronos hedonist.⁵¹

Pater himself strongly objected to this characterization, complaining to Edmund Gosse, ‘I wish they wouldn’t call me “a hedonist”; it produces such a bad effect on the minds of people who don’t know Greek’.⁵² Yet it was this Pater that Mallock caricatured in *The New Republic* as the sensual Mr. Rose, who according to one character ‘always seems to talk of everybody as if they had no clothes on’.⁵³ This interpretation of Pater may also have owed something to what Sara Lyons has called ‘the old (and very Victorian) association of atheism with unfettered sexuality’.⁵⁴

There was another Pater. Richard Le Gallienne, in his 1899 novel *Young Lives* – a semi-autobiographical tale of an aesthetic young man coming of age in 1880s Liverpool – has his protagonist, Henry Mesurier, stumble upon Pater’s 1885 novel *Marius the Epicurean*. In it he finds ‘a beauty at once so sensuous and so spiritual – the beauty of flowering laurel, the beauty of austerity aflower’. ‘The whole book was the spiritual story of a young Roman’s soul, a priestlike artistic temperament’, though ‘the theme presented many fascinating analogies to the present time’. Henry’s first impulse is to compare the temperament of Marius with his own – he ‘found many correspondences with his own nature’ – and to recommend it to his sister and friends as an ethical guide: ‘what gleaming single phrases, whole counsels of existence in a

⁵⁰ Frank Harris, *My Life and Loves*, 5 vols (London: W. H. Allen, 1964).

⁵¹ Edgar Jepson, *Memories of a Victorian* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933), 102.

⁵² Edmund Gosse, ‘Walter Pater’, in *Critical Kit-Kats* (London: William Heinemann, 1896), 239-72; 258.

⁵³ Mallock, *The New Republic*, vol. 2, 139.

⁵⁴ Lyons, *Victorian Aestheticism, Doubt, and Secularisation*, 30.

dozen words! He must copy out some of them for Esther'. And though emphasizing always Pater's concern with the 'sensuous' world, his 'joy in the sensuous form', yet he is clear also that this is separate entirely from sensuality and sexuality, and he scoffs at an insensitive reader who he remembered had compared it in conversation to Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*: 'was not the beauty of that masterpiece, in comparison with the beauty of this, as the beauty of a leopard-skin to the beauty of a statue of Minerva, withdrawn in a grove of ilex [?]' Having read the book in a public house, 'Henry emerged from his tavern-cloister upon the warm brilliancy of the streets. All around him the lights beacons, and the women called with bright eyes'. But his reading of *Marius* has, at least temporarily, chastened Henry: 'to-night there was no temptation for him in these things. They but recalled another exquisite quotation from his new-found treasure, which he stopped under a lamp to fix in his memory'.⁵⁵ Standing under a street-lamp in Liverpool, surrounded by the temptations of nightlife, Henry then re-reads a passage in which Marius, having arrived for the first time in Rome, faces similar temptation and resists, since 'it was to no wasteful and vagrant affections, such as these, that his Epicureanism had committed him'.⁵⁶ In imitation of this moral example, Henry heads homewards, having used *Marius* much as one would an advice book for 'young men', a genre that proliferated towards the end of the century as explored in Chapter One (cf. 65).

For some among the generation that followed him, Pater meant, not indulgence in sensual pleasure, but rather this strict, austere, disciplined ethical position that extended for many to a particular attitude towards sexuality. T. S. Eliot named *The Renaissance* as Pater's 'more "influential" book', and in general this may

⁵⁵ Richard Le Gallienne, *Young Lives* (London: The Bodley Head, 1899), 158, 155, 156, 157, 156, 159, 160.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 160. See Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1910; first published 1885), vol. 1, 187.

be true;⁵⁷ yet when Yeats recalled that he and his peers at the end of the century had ‘looked consciously to Pater for our philosophy’, it was *Marius* rather than the famous ‘Conclusion’ to *The Renaissance* that he gave as example.⁵⁸ Yeats continued, ‘Pater had made us learned; and, whatever we might be elsewhere, ceremonious and polite’. He wrote of ‘the temperate life Pater had commended’.⁵⁹ Along with this outward manner, Yeats associated with Pater an attitude of ethical caution:

Perhaps it was because of Pater’s influence that we, with an affectation of learning, claimed the whole past of literature for our authority, instead of finding it, like the young men in the age of comedy that followed us, in some new, and so still unrefuted authority; that we preferred what seemed still uncrumbled rock to the still unspotted foam; that we were traditional alike in our dress, in our manner, in our opinions, and in our style.⁶⁰

The philosophy he inspired was often one of what Lionel Johnson called ‘grave beauty, passionate scholarship, elect restraint’.⁶¹ It was this Pater, the Pater of reserve and restraint, that so many young readers and writers of the next generation associated, not with sexual license, but with a culturally conservative Aestheticism to which productive sexual continence was vital. Le Gallienne, in his gossipy memoir *The Romantic ’90s* (1925), refers to ‘the gospel of beauty and “ecstasy”, which Pater taught with hierarchical reserve and with subdued though intense passion and colour of words’.⁶² Pater’s attitude of ‘reserve’ in teaching this ‘gospel’ is compared to that of Wilde, who ‘popularized, and indeed somewhat vulgarized, as he perhaps to a degree misunderstood, and certainly dangerously applied’ that same creed. The

⁵⁷ T. S. Eliot, ‘Arnold and Pater’ (first published 1932), in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 431-43; 431.

⁵⁸ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Works*, general eds Richard J. Finneran and George Mills Harper, vol. 3: *Autobiographies*, eds William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1984-; this volume published 1999; this section first published 1922), 335.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 235; W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972), 97.

⁶⁰ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 235.

⁶¹ Lionel Johnson, ‘Mr. Pater’s Humour’, in *Post Liminium: Essays and Critical Papers*, ed. Thomas Whittemore (London: Elkin Mathews, 1912), 11-14; 11.

⁶² Richard Le Gallienne, *The Romantic ’90s* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co: 1925), 98.

dynamic of ‘passion’ and restraint emerges again and again in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century characterizations of Pater. For Arthur Galton ‘his world is shown in the dry light of reason, but a reason mellowed by wisdom, though charged and coloured by tense and almost passionate feeling’.⁶³ Johnson remembered that, although ‘Mr. Pater was never more characteristically inspired than in writing of the discipline of art, its immense demands, its imperative morality’, yet ‘no books are more full than his of gracious loving-kindness; of such tremulous and tender pity as would disgrace the hedonist in his Epicurean calm’.⁶⁴ A. C. Benson found in Pater’s writing ‘a character of curious intensity and depth, within certain defined limits’, a ‘richness under a severe restraint’, and is explicit about the sexual behaviour that such a style implied: ‘to be intellectually and perceptively impassioned indeed he desired; but the physical ardours of love, the longing for enamoured possession – with this Pater had nothing in common’.⁶⁵

Whether or not such lack of sexual desire was indeed the case for Pater the man, Benson’s was certainly not a controversial opinion. It was common also to find Pater lacking in ‘virility’ or ‘vitality’: he was, wrote Benson, ‘a man of low physical vitality’, while Harris mused that, ‘if Pater had had [...] a little more vitality and hotter blood [...] he would have been another Gautier’. Gosse similarly wrote of ‘natures like his, in which the tide of physical spirits runs low, in which the vitality is lukewarm’.⁶⁶ Occasionally these doubts were expressed as gender disruption, with Gosse describing Pater’s manner as that of ‘a sort of solemn effeminacy’, and Le Gallienne remembering him as ‘almost maidenly, if one might use the word of so

⁶³ Arthur Galton, ‘Walter Pater’, in *Acer In Hostem* (Windermere: A. W. Johnson & Sons, 1913), 37-43; 37.

⁶⁴ Johnson, ‘The Work of Mr. Pater’, in *Post Liminium*, 19-41; 29, 30.

⁶⁵ A. C. Benson, *Walter Pater* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 27, 204, 86.

⁶⁶ Benson, *Walter Pater*, 203; Harris, ‘Walter Pater’, 222; Gosse, ‘Walter Pater’, 266.

large and masculine a man'.⁶⁷ These phrases recall particularly references, by no means always negative, to Newman as having had the manner of a maiden lady, a tendency which, as Oliver Buckton notes, continued into the twentieth century.⁶⁸

Both Newman's and Pater's idealizations of continence have recently been read as expressing a nascent form of homosexuality: in Newman's case, what Frederick Roden has called 'queer virginity', an unconscious conversion of homosexual into religious ardour or feelings of friendship for men; in the case of Pater, as everything from a similar 'unconscious' homoerotic inclination to an active though covert homosexuality.⁶⁹ It is clear that proponents of what was quickly beginning to look like modern homosexual identity consciously adopted many of the discourses I outline here as connected with productive sexual continence. Writers such as Wilde, Carpenter, Symonds, and Marc-André Raffalovich drew on many historical sources in common with the discourse of productive sexual continence – Ancient Greek culture, particularly as represented in Plato, the Christian Church Fathers, Catholicism – as well as finding expression in similar ideals of behaviour, such as personal restraint within romantic friendship. The discourse of productive sexual continence has, throughout history, overlapped with and allowed covert expression of what we would now term homosexual desires, as well as providing a framework for emergent homosexual culture. To this extent, the history of sexual continence is certainly of concern to those writing the history of homosexuality (and vice versa). It is vital, however, that these discourses are not reduced to an indiscriminate mass. As Jeff Nunokawa says in his reading of the similar (but more sexualized) ideal of 'sexual self-management' in the work of Wilde, such a position

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 267; Le Gallienne, *The Romantic '90s*, 101.

⁶⁸ Oliver S. Buckton, *Secret Selves: Confession and Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 39.

⁶⁹ Frederick Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 11-34. I address queer readings of Pater more thoroughly in Chapter Two.

‘may be especially appealing to the homosexual’, but ‘it is not his or her exclusive property’.⁷⁰ The writers discussed here have been all been described as homosexual by recent criticism; and some of them may, had it been possible, have recognized their sexual orientation as similar to those of today’s homosexual culture. But while it may well be true, at least in part, that historical discourses of sexual continence owe something to the repression or conscious coding of homosexuality, yet attending to them primarily as such risks obscuring the place held by such discourses in wider networks of meaning. In emphasizing here the idea of continence itself rather than the object of desire, I hope not to elide or obfuscate the relationship between such ideas and homosexuality, but simply to allow a currently overlooked discourse, and the values commonly associated with it, to become visible.

In undertaking a form of literary discourse analysis, I propose something akin to the group of reading methods that have recently been referred to under the name ‘surface reading’. This largely American movement within literary studies, more a general shift towards certain modes of reading than a single organized theory, has gone under many names in the last fifteen years that can nevertheless be identified as a coherent body of critical thought. ‘Just’, ‘slow’ or ‘literal’, ‘descriptive’ or ‘flat’, and ‘reparative’ as well as ‘surface’ reading have been posited, while the critical practices in opposition to which innovation is proposed has varied from psychoanalytical and Marxist theory to New Historicism, deconstruction, and Queer Studies.⁷¹ Broadly speaking, these somewhat disparate interventions indicate a critical

⁷⁰ Jeff Nunokawa, *Tame Passions of Wilde: The Styles of Manageable Desire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 12.

⁷¹ See respectively: Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 3; Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood, ‘Afterword’, *Representations*, 108:1 (Fall, 2009), 139-46, 141, 139; Heather Love, ‘Close but not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn’, *New Literary History*, 41:2 (Spring, 2010), 371-91, 382, 376; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, ‘Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You’, in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 123-51, 123.

rejection of what has been termed ‘symptomatic’, ‘suspicious’ or ‘paranoid’ reading practices. All object to the domination in twenty- and twenty-first-century literary studies of what Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, in their essay ‘Surface Reading: an Introduction’ (2009), call ‘an interpretive method that argues that the most interesting aspect of a text is what it represses’, as well as to reading methods that seek hidden truths, or interpret texts purely according to external structures of meaning.⁷² They propose readings which ‘attend to the surfaces of texts’ in order ‘to describe’ them ‘accurately’, to give detailed accounts of, among other things, the way in which discourses operate within and across texts, to ‘rearrange texts into new forms but nonetheless attend to what is present rather than privilege what is absent’.⁷³ ‘Surface’, in this context, is by no means a superficial element: though it is taken ‘to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts; what is neither hidden nor hiding’, yet what is identified may be complex.⁷⁴ ‘Surface’ reading has also been criticized for what Kristina Straub calls ‘a kind of innocence, a neutral engagement with the texts on their own terms’; but this is to simplify considerably.⁷⁵ Those engaged tend to propose a constant process of negotiation between texts and one’s own subjectivity, a struggle towards awareness and accommodation without which all critical activity would be impossible.⁷⁶

Forays into ‘surface reading’ occasionally trip over their own spatial metaphors, as well as straying towards the ethics of reading, a direction in which this thesis does not follow. Yet the ideas which inform ‘surface reading’, especially that of

⁷² Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’, *Representations*, 108:1 (Fall, 2009), 1-21, 3.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 1, 16, 10.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁷⁵ Kristina Straub, ‘The Suspicious Reader Surprised, Or, What I Learned From “Surface Reading”’, *The Eighteenth Century*, 54:1 (Spring, 2013), 139-43; 139.

⁷⁶ See Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading’, 16, 18. See also Amanda Anderson, *The Way We Argue Now: A Study in the Cultures of Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1-3.

attentiveness to the manner in which an idea or thing is represented, rather than the possible motivations for such representation, can, I think, provide a useful approach to the study of late nineteenth-century sexual discourse in particular. The success of such an approach can be seen in the work of Sharon Marcus and Carolyn Oulton on romantic friendship in the period. In approaching discourse exclusively as it is represented in texts, Marcus writes that ‘rather than focus on what texts do not or cannot say, I use a method I call “just reading,” which attends to what texts make manifest on their surface’.⁷⁷ Her analysis of female friendship in late nineteenth-century novels and popular writing indicates the prevalence, not of latent and suppressed homosexuality, but rather a form of relationship that was important in its own right and should be understood as such. Oulton follows a similar method when she calls for greater attention to ‘the terms of late nineteenth-century thought’.⁷⁸ In doing so, she contends that romantic friendship was not a space of unusual sexual innocence, but rather one that recognized the area it shared with same-sex sexuality, and thrived from its careful regulation of feeling away from it. Of the deployment of Plato in this context she writes that ‘this conscious adaptation of Greek ideals can hardly be consistent with a lack of sexual awareness’; circumvention of homosexual content in Plato may be self-aware, and yet not necessarily hypocritical. ‘Whatever ambiguities later scholars have identified’, she states, ‘in the nineteenth century demonstrations of love between friends could escape condemnation from, or even be deployed by, otherwise conservative commentators’. She continues, ‘romantic friendship was not necessarily conflated with homosexuality – it may often have been damned by association, but that is not the same thing’.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Marcus, *Between Women*, 3.

⁷⁸ Carolyn Oulton, *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 154.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 155, 153, 156.

Something similar can be said for sexual continence, which is so often automatically interpreted as hidden or ‘coded’ homosexuality. It could reasonably be claimed that it was precisely the wide political potential of continence, its ability to accommodate both radical and conservative positions, which made it especially attractive to a homosexual culture interested in both anti-social and socially conciliatory attitudes. ‘Coding’ – the use of agreed generic signs and signals to indicate dissident sexualities – is of little use in a suppressive society if it cannot at once signal disruption and safety. If the sign does not signify, most of the time and to most people, a socially acceptable and therefore innocuous sexual configuration, then it would be useless as a device with which to circumvent majority understanding. Productive sexual continence was occasionally exploited as ‘code’ for socially deviant sexualities. But for the most part it represented a sexual concept entirely in accord with much historical, and with a significant portion of Victorian, sexual discourse. It is this primary discourse, rather than what it potentially signalled to a minority readership, that this thesis seeks to describe. In reading this discourse for its usual rather than unusual meanings, I hope both to demonstrate the centrality of productive sexual continence to Victorian systems of thought, and to advocate a reading method that preserves rather than disrupts the delicate tissue of discourse that makes up historical representations of sexuality.

My focus for these readings will be the separate bodies of work produced by individual writers. Foucault has warned against using the concept of ‘author’ or ‘work’ in a naïve manner to designate an unjustified unity.⁸⁰ All of the authors explored here were intensely aware of what Foucault calls the ‘plurality of egos’

⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, ‘What is an Author?’, in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews by Michel Foucault*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, trans. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113-38.

created by authorship, the gap between the individual and the ‘author-function’.⁸¹ This is especially true of Lee, whose use of a literary pseudonym in personal relationships confused the two, and of Moore, whose brand of semi-fictional autobiography uses both his own name and those of others to similar effect. I have, as far as possible, sought to resist the temptation to assign undue psychology or ‘expression’ to the individual based on the utterances of the author-function, and particularly to take utterances concerning sexuality to reflect actual behaviours, especially sexual behaviours, desires, or impulses. The author is thus, to a certain extent at least, ‘stripped of its creative role and analysed as a complex and variable function of discourse’. It must be noted, however, that this does not rob the individual of all agency, as they remain as an organizing function, an agent of selection and discrimination, much as the individual functions within the society ruled by Foucauldian power.⁸² The ideas that I describe manifest differently in the writing of different authors, whether this writing consists of criticism, novels, drafts, notes, or letters, and I have taken this difference as a useful indication of discursive unity. These authors are read alongside each other here, however, because enough similarity occurs between them to identify a coherent discourse that transcends the author-function, and can be referred to as a literary tradition corresponding to a discourse readable in other cultural productions. The result has been the identification of a discursive continuity between works and authors, some of which are not commonly written about together.

A large portion of recent work on late nineteenth-century sexuality has been done in conjunction with Queer Studies. I do not, however, use the word ‘queer’ to refer to either these individuals or their work. This is not because there is no space

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 130, 125.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 137.

within Queer Studies in which to explore the discourse outlined here, or because this thesis owes no debt to the Queer Studies of the past. The project could not have existed without the flexibility and acceptability that Queer Studies have made possible in work on sexuality. Since it became widely used in the 1990s, however, the word ‘queer’ has, despite the discipline’s ‘refusal to define its proper field of operation in relation to any fixed content’, nevertheless acquired associations that would hinder rather than help in the task at hand.⁸³ The first of these associations is with a particular understanding of sexuality as an infinitely flexible and expandable category. Some of the foremost scholars in Queer Studies have been heavily influenced by psychoanalysis, whether that of Jacques Lacan (Lee Edelman), Melanie Klein (Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick) or Jean Laplanche (Leo Bersani), and have used the psychological frameworks it provides to formulate theories concerning the working of sexuality in a variety of contexts. Though this approach has yielded important results in many areas, it involves elaborate theories of sexual psychology that have scant room for the genuinely non-sexual.

These theories reproduce with regard to sexuality what ‘surface’ readers follow Paul Ricoeur in calling a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’, where the category of the sexual is found to be most important where its workings are least apparent.⁸⁴ Marcus and Best have claimed that at the end of the twentieth century ‘this hermeneutics of suspicion became a general property of literary criticism even for those who did not adhere strictly to psychoanalysis’.⁸⁵ This is certainly true within the study of sexuality in literature, with the result that Queer Studies in particular have

⁸³ Donald E. Hall *et al.* eds, ‘Introduction’, in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2013), xiv-xx; xvi.

⁸⁴ See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970; originally published in French as *De l'interprétation. Essai sur Sigmund Freud*, 1965), 356.

⁸⁵ Best and Marcus, ‘Surface Reading’, 5.

become firmly associated with a conception of sexuality that has little to say about the active denial or refusal of sex as a positive part of an ideal mode of life. Recent work on late nineteenth-century sexual continence in literature, for instance, whether or not this work explicitly engages with psychoanalysis or with Queer Studies, has often employed a quasi-psychoanalytical conception of sexuality in which continence is read as a sexual orientation in its own right, complete with a set of pleasures and desires identifiable as sexual.⁸⁶ Continence is read either as a covert expression of socially deviant sexuality, or a ‘sublimation’ that creates an intense, always-deferred sexuality expressed in activities other than genital acts. Ellis Hanson, for example, has written of ‘the tendency of the decadents to displace sexuality onto textuality’, creating a situation ‘in which sexuality was more likely to find articulation in the stylistic excesses of gothic and baroque art than in any genital transgression’, because ‘the ecstasies of art and religion [...] are a spiritualization and an intensification of desire’.⁸⁷ Similarly, Roden has read nineteenth-century religious practices as channelling ‘an erotic energy that might be expressed as love, sublimated in friendship, used as the driving force for the creation of literary art, or embraced as religious ecstasy’, and uses the word ‘queer’ to describe this ‘sublimated state’.⁸⁸ And Nunokawa, in his reading of Wilde’s work as developing a management of sexual desire that would ‘remove the element of compulsion from the chemistry of the erotic’, finds that ‘managing passions is merely a matter of giving them form or expression’.⁸⁹ Nunokawa represents Wilde as setting out to control desire, but actually

⁸⁶ This is less the case in work on other historical periods, which has generally grounded its discussion of sexuality and sexual continence in dense historical context: for instance, Bonnie Lander Johnson, *Chastity in Early Stuart Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Corrinne Harol, *Enlightened Virginity in the Eighteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); and Judith Fletcher and Bonnie MacLachlen eds, *Virginity Revisited: Configurations of the Unpossessed Body* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007).

⁸⁷ Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 23.

⁸⁸ Roden, *Same-Sex Desire*, 4.

⁸⁹ Nunokawa, *Tame Passions*, 3, 5.

finding desire in a different form. While often providing subtle accounts of the complexities of nineteenth-century sexuality, especially in the case of Nunokawa, approaching continence as ‘sublimation’ nevertheless obscures the particular discourse explored by this thesis.⁹⁰ Freud’s theory of artistic ‘sublimation’, in which ‘what an artist creates provides at the same time an outlet for his sexual desire’, is itself a product of late nineteenth-century sexual discourse, and can be viewed historically as a further evolution of the discourse of productive sexual continence explored here, a point upon which I expand in Chapter One (cf. 56).⁹¹

Another common association with the word ‘queer’ that makes it unhelpful for this project is that of radical sexual politics. Nunokawa declines to use the word ‘queer’ to describe the ‘complex of desires’ that he sees at work in Wilde’s writing because of Queer Studies’ ‘tendency to link socially marginal sexual identities with politically progressive positions and an aesthetic avant-garde’.⁹² Similar reservations can be made when describing discourses of sexual continence in the late nineteenth century. A recent example of what happens when sexual continence in particular meets these prevailing tendencies in Queer Studies can be seen in Benjamin Kahan’s *Celibacies* (2013). The strength of Kahan’s work is in his objection to the tendency of Queer Studies to read celibacy from within a binary opposition of liberated/repressed, what he calls the ‘expressive hypothesis’, in which sexuality manifested in acts

⁹⁰ For more examples of such readings, see John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Kathy Alexis Psomiades, *Beauty’s Body: Femininity and Representation in British Aestheticism* (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 1997); Dennis Denisoff, *Aestheticism and Sexual Parody, 1840-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2001); Whitney Davis, *Queer Beauty: Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winckelmann to Freud and Beyond* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010); Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

⁹¹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood’, in *Complete Psychological Works: Standard Edition*, vol. 11, ed. and trans. James Strachey *et al.* (London: Hogarth Press, 1978; this edition first published 1957; originally published in German as ‘Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci’, 1910), 63-137; 133.

⁹² Nunokawa, *Tame Passions*, 12 (n).

(genital or otherwise) is thought to be both self-evidently desirable and to have privileged access to the political Left. In Kahan's view, this configuration is the result of the political environment from which Queer Studies emerged; of the 'crusade against censorship' involved in second-wave feminism and the reaction to the AIDS epidemic that established, according to Kahan, 'a dichotomy (which queer theory inherits) between censorship and conservative politics on the one hand, and expression and oppositional liberal politics on the other', which left 'no room for sexuality that does not aspire to normative sexual acts'. Kahan takes the Queer Studies of the past to task for its treatment of representations of celibacy, which have either been interpreted as 'coded' homosexuality or dismissed as the result, conscious or unconscious, of political oppression. 'The very real tension between celibate and queer ways of reading', he writes, 'is indicative of more than a hermeneutic question – this divergence maps competing and overlapping sexual ideologies and cultures'.⁹³

Kahan's is one of the most sensitive approaches to sexually continent states to emerge from the broad spectrum of Queer Studies. Arguably, however, he addresses the divergence between celibacy and queerness by reproducing Queer Studies' preconception of sexuality as an infinite category, and even claiming to expand on it. '*Celibacies*', he writes, 'reorganizes, complicates, and expands our current theorizations of what counts as "sex" and what signifies as "sexual"'. He tackles celibacy not by finding a way of theorizing the genuinely non-sexual, but rather by extending the term 'sexual' to include what has previously been considered non-sexual, what he calls 'resexualising the nongenital in order to imagine a celibacy animated by sexual currents, desires, identifications, and pleasures'. Kahan's project, though a critique of the Queer Studies of the past, ultimately becomes a fulfilment of

⁹³ Benjamin Kahan, *Celibacies: American Modernism and Sexual Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 4, 5, 3.

possibilities already inherent in that approach. In expanding the borders of Queer Studies, he risks perpetuating its conceptual limitations. Though understanding celibacy as ‘an organization of pleasure rather than a failure, renunciation, or even asceticism of pleasure’, for Kahan this very existence of pleasure within celibacy makes it sexual, with, as he puts it, ‘the sexiness of no sex’.⁹⁴ As for so many before him, desire and pleasure do not seem to make sense outside of a sexual framework.

Kahan’s conception of celibate sexuality also reproduces Queer Studies’ problematic predilection for binary politics. Though he had criticized Queer Studies for giving ‘expressive’ sexuality privileged access to the political Left, he nevertheless extends such access to his newly sexualized celibacy, and no further. The connection between sexuality and the political Left remains intact. His intention in revaluing ‘celibacy as possessing special purchase on its putative counterpart “the sexual”’ is, he writes, to ‘argue that an abiding public discourse of and around celibacy was a powerful tool of the political Left at the turn of the century and can continue to be so today’.⁹⁵ So far as this means that discourses of celibacy and sexual continence were, at the turn of the century, often found in conjunction with political or ethical values that we would now associate with the political Left – for example, belief in the equal political rights of women, or the working classes – Kahan is correct.⁹⁶ And his choice of the age of ‘Modernism’, which as he usefully points out, generally included in its development an association between the ideas ‘modern’ and ‘sexual’, means that he is not short of examples of celibacy portrayed in an apparently sexualized manner. But his ahistorical representation of the political spectrum as a sharply dichotomized ‘Left’ and ‘Right’ – we must not, he says, ‘cede celibacy to the

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1, 143, 4, 27.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 1, 2.

⁹⁶ For first-wave feminism, see Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists* (New York: The New Press, 1995); for the working classes, see Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexual Attitudes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 117-66.

Right', assuming that his readers share his binary politics and stand with him on one side of it – risks identifying certain historical writers (Henry James, for example) as 'Radical' or even 'progressive' purely because of their apparent sexual preferences, which are valued above their stated political affiliations or positions.⁹⁷ This would be problematic whether or not celibacy was understood as a form of sexuality in its own right. The relationship between sexuality and politics is surely more complicated, more difficult than this.

This study differs from Kahan's in exploring not a sexual identity that may or may not have been reflected in behaviour, but rather a certain manner of representing sex within late nineteenth-century Aesthetic writing. I have therefore, though working closely with a Foucauldian notion of 'discourse', parted ways both with Foucault and with much current work on sexuality in literature, and instead followed Arnold I. Davidson in his *The Emergence of Sexuality* (2001) by putting questions of 'power' hypothetically on hold, in order to allow the description of a discourse that, while often converging around points of social and political privilege – male, heterosexual, middle-class – nevertheless overlapped categories of gender and sexual orientation.⁹⁸ While my temporary restriction of these topics to the borders rather than the centre of my discussion of late nineteenth-century Aesthetic writing has given room for a single discourse to be described at length, yet it is my hope that the detail given here will allow and encourage further readings of late nineteenth-century Aestheticism in its relation to power, particularly as reflected in its treatment of gender and sexual identity, as well as recognition of the importance of a discourse of productive sexual continence to other areas of late nineteenth-century British society. The idea that sexual continence was possible, at least potentially healthy, and could positively

⁹⁷ Kahan, *Celibacies*, 6-8, 153.

⁹⁸ Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality*, 32.

affect both one's personal experience and one's relationship with others was one which both existed and was considered persuasive in many different strata of late nineteenth-century British culture. Recognition of this discourse, and the many different values which were attached to it, can contribute to historical understanding not only of how sexuality has been conceived of and represented, but also of the myriad other areas of thought upon which sexual discourse touches.

The thesis consists of five chapters. The first chapter attempts to indicate something of the pervasiveness of a productive ideal of sexual continence in some of the main cultural areas, both contemporary and historical, to which nineteenth-century Aesthetic writers would have looked when shaping an aesthetically informed ethics of living. The sheer ubiquity of this discourse in the period makes this section necessarily selective; and yet I have sought to preserve an impression of breadth, of multiple potential lines of influence rather than imply a misleading sense of causality. This is followed by three chapters, in which a particular branch of late nineteenth-century Aestheticism, to which productive sexual continence was central, is described. These chapters explore the work of Walter Pater, Lionel Johnson, and Vernon Lee respectively. A fifth chapter then explores the resurfacing of this discourse in the work of George Moore, a writer who combined it with very different and potentially even contradictory sexual systems. Finally, a conclusion indicates the usefulness of this revised understanding of sexuality within Aestheticism in looking at various other aspects of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and culture. In this manner I hope to show how the discourse of productive sexual continence was worked closely into thinking about the aesthetic life in the late nineteenth-century, as well as to demonstrate the sheer abundance of possible sources

for such ideas in the wider culture, and the degree to which this discourse can be seen to influence thinking about art in the twentieth and even twenty first centuries.

Chapter One

Loss and Gain: the Medical and Intellectual Background

Sexual systems from ancient Greece to Victorian Britain and beyond have considered excessive sexual activity, including masturbation, to be dangerous to general health. The majority have traced this danger either to the loss of semen (in the case of men, with equivalent physical losses hypothesised for women), or some other form of energy loss beyond that of normal physical exercise. Most of these have also shown a tendency to reverse this logic so as to claim that continence might lead to an increase in power, whether that power be imagined as physical strength, devotional concentration, intellectual or creative ability. It is true that many of the societies that produced such systems also entertained contradictory ideas. In nineteenth-century Britain for example, as well as Europe and America, ideals of productive sexual continence existed side-by-side with the idea that sexual activity was necessary to health and continence damaging. But sexual discourse generally cannot be usefully understood unless it is admitted that separate discourses are not in practice as mutually exclusive as their reliance on rationalized bodily systems would seem to suggest. Rationally dissonant sexual discourses have always had a habit of prospering alongside one another, in what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has called ‘the unrationalized coexistence of different models’, observable in societies, in communities, in individuals, and even in the same document.¹

The brief account that follows in this chapter is by no means offered as an exhaustive history of sexual continence, or even of continence in the nineteenth century. A wealth of historical work can be found on the meanings and practice of

¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 47.

continence in a range of time periods and places, though this is not without its gaps and biases. The present overview is, in the first instance, merely intended to indicate the sheer consistency with which the idea of productive sexual continence can be found in both the immediate and historical sources available to Victorian Aesthetic writers in the process of developing an aesthetic mode of life. The first of these sources, nineteenth-century medical culture, is rarely (except by George Moore) referred to explicitly in Aesthetic writing. I have, nevertheless, for the most part focused upon mainstream and popular medical culture rather than the sexology that emerged in mid-nineteenth-century Europe, with the exceptions of Freud and Havelock Ellis. Valuable connections have been made between that genre and aspects of the Aesthetic Movement; yet its influence was arguably limited in the pre-1900 period compared to the former, which was so culturally present as to form an inevitable context to any writing concerning the sexual body.

The other sources explored here, classical and Christian (some early Christian but also Tractarian) are often, though not always, more explicitly echoed in Aesthetic writing. As well as simply echoing the productive sexual continence found in nineteenth-century medical culture, however, these sources are notable for reproducing a similar integration of sexual continence into a mode of life in which it is imagined as both a personally strengthening and socially effective practice. Though often treated, both in the Victorian period and in modern criticism, as antithetical influences, many classical and Christian sources in fact agree, at least broadly, on an individually and socially productive sexual continence. Victorian scholars, including Aesthetic writers, frequently emphasized these points of continuity.

These writers were, like all before and after, exposed to a wide range of sexual discourses; but sounding particularly loudly in their ears at this time, from all

directions, and to a degree now hard for us to imagine, would have been the discourse of productive sexual continence. The echo that this discourse produces in their work suggests a diversity of positions concerning sexuality within Aestheticism, beyond what is currently acknowledged.

Medical Culture:

(i) Professional Medicine

The spermatic fluid [...] is not [...] an excrementitious fluid, and intended, like the urine, to be eliminated from the body; but, on the contrary (except during an occasional act of generation) to be received into the circulation, and thence distributed to every part of the system. It is the presence of the semen in the circulating fluids of the male, and the accumulated influences of the unexhausted ovaria in the system of the female, which gives to the countenances of the continent and chaste the peculiar expression of energy and vigorous health which generally characterise them[.]²

The above pronouncement by James Richard Smyth, a qualified doctor, was published in 1841 in *The Lancet*. It cannot quite be said to be typical of mainstream Victorian medical discourse in the 1840s. Michael Mason has shown that the medical profession was what he calls ‘pro-sensual in tendency’, asserting that sex was not only natural, but also necessary to the health of both genders.³ Yet statements like Smyth’s were also common, and well within what professional medicine taken as a whole – in Mason’s terms ‘a broad church’ – could and did consider normal. While many may have queried its physiology,⁴ there was no question of its necessarily harbouring perverse sexuality or subversive politics; though it was, as we will see, occasionally put to use towards the end of the century on both sides of the political

² James Richard Smyth, ‘Miscellaneous Contributions to Pathology and Therapeutics: Impotence and Sterility’, *The Lancet*, 36:939 (1841), 779-85; 784.

³ See Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 226.

⁴ *Ibid.*

spectrum (cf. 69). Furthermore, though few professionals at any level would after the 1840s have given full credence to Smyth's sexual system, many retained its basic logic in forming their own ideas concerning sexual physiology. This logic informed a manner of thinking about sexuality that was potentially accessible to anyone who consulted a doctor, though there is reason to suppose that doctors were also influenced by their patients in this respect.⁵

Smyth gives literal expression to the idea that sex involved the loss of a substance which otherwise would be reabsorbed into the system, and was vital for the health of that system, in women as much as in men. Mason, whose work on Victorian sexual culture reveals a dense network of overlapping values and ideas often logically contradictory, refers to such physiologically literal ideas as 'haematic theory', claiming that they derived from the ancient theory, found in Galen and elsewhere, that semen was a special distillation of the blood.⁶ The physiological thinking behind this theory was complex and based primarily in observation and deduction. Semen, it was thought, was life-giving, and must therefore contain 'breath' (the Galenic *pneuma* or *spiritus*), the substance necessary to all life. Observing during animal dissection the structural similarity between lungs and heart, researchers supposed that they shared a function, and that *pneuma* must circulate in or with the blood. Semen, it followed, must therefore contain, or even be entirely made up of blood, and it was suggested that the intricacies of the epididymis allowed for the process of distillation of blood into semen.⁷ As for women, many authorities began from the assumption that the female system worked largely like the male, and attested that the female generative organs produced a substance equivalent to semen that was either also ejaculated on

⁵ See *Ibid.*, 180-80, and Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience from Victoria to Freud*, vol. 1, *The Education of the Senses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 316-17.

⁶ Mason, *Victorian Sexuality*, 208.

⁷ See Aline Rouselle, *Porneia: On Desire and the Body in Antiquity*, trans. Felicia Pheasant (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988; originally published in French as *Porneia*, 1983), 13.

orgasm, or continuously secreted, the mingling of which with male semen created life (this theory was never, however, uncontroversial, and was contested by Aristotle among others).⁸ From this logic, combined with the observation that men especially felt tired and depressed after ejaculation, followed the deduction that sexual activity in practice drew too readily on the blood of both genders, and that excessive activity exhausted the body's natural process of production, causing it to drain other systems of blood and with it, life-giving *pneuma*. It was also feared that the convulsions of orgasm were harmful to the bodily systems, and that the excessive shocks could enervate the whole body, especially the brain. What constituted such 'excess' depended, of course, on how well one wished to believe the body naturally adapted to sexual activity.⁹

It is difficult to overestimate the influence of Greek and Roman medicine upon Victorian sexual discourse, both indirectly via Renaissance and eighteenth-century medicine and directly through the reading of ancient texts. And yet the majority of the Victorian medical profession from at least the 1830s scoffed at haematic theory, as Mason claims. But Mason slightly underestimates the power of such discourses of spermatic loss and gain when he attributes *all* such literalism to an attendant belief that semen was made from blood. There is nothing to suggest such an idea in Smyth's statement; though he does say that semen will, upon reabsorption, be present 'in the circulating fluids', he does not directly claim that this is where it initially came from, while he is even more vague on the female equivalent. By 1841 Smyth was certainly paddling against the current of professional medical opinion when he claimed that the body reabsorbed unejaculated semen. But what he presents is more complex than the mere repetition of a defunct theory. What we potentially see

⁸ *Ibid*, 27.

⁹ *Ibid*, 14, 13.

here is an attempt to reconcile medical discovery with personal sexual convictions, though it is also possible that Smyth was what Mason calls a ‘fringe-doctor’ or ‘semi-quack’, a qualified doctor who practiced at the ‘edge of legitimacy’, possibly having some economic investment in the cultivation among the lay public and general practitioners of officially outdated medical systems.¹⁰ This would not, however, make him any less representative of general ideas about sexuality in the period; if anything, it likely makes him more so, as economic interest obliged one to reflect and encourage popular prejudice. Whatever his motivation, Smyth’s views were, in 1841, plausible enough to be published in the *Lancet* as a serious contribution to medical debate.

Haematic theory was, as Mason says, ‘officially repudiated’ in the Victorian period and does not appear in the discourse of cutting-edge medical research after the 1820s.¹¹ But while those wishing to maintain their professional credibility were almost certain, after about 1850, to state explicitly that the semen itself was negligible as far as personal health was concerned, yet these statements were not incompatible with further references in the same texts to semen as ‘vital fluid’ or ‘precious substance’, suggestive of either lingering ideas, or a strength of residual public opinion that the majority of doctors were loath to alienate. And even more common were forms of description that suggest that the logic of sexual loss and gain continued to make sense throughout the period, to doctors as much as to the lay public. This was not a single medical theory that could be officially and thoroughly debunked. Rather,

¹⁰ Mason, *Victorian Sexuality*, 208, 202, 188. For more on the Victorian medical ‘fringe’, see Roy Porter, *Quacks: Fakery and Charlatans in English Medicine* (Stroud: Tempus, 2000), 200-06. For the fraught nature of this divide and its impact upon literary culture throughout the period, see Sylvia Pamboukian, *Doctoring the Novel: Medicine and Quackery from Shelley to Doyle* (Athen: Ohio University Press, 2012).

¹¹ Mason, *Victorian Sexuality*, 208-09.

it was a constellation of sexual systems, some elaborate and some rudimentary, which worked to a similar logic and were by no means limited to nineteenth-century Britain.

The haematic theory of late Antiquity was one of these systems. The eighteenth century saw an expansion of the medical profession and with it a rapid proliferation of bodily systems, many of which incorporated a sexual logic of loss and gain, though they shunned literal haematic theory. For example, Friedrich Hoffman (1660-1742) developed a system of *tonus* or tone (broadly related to muscular tone, tension or firmness), in which the organism was made up of fibres with the ability to contract and dilate. Hoffman worried about the strain that orgasm and particularly male ejaculation caused to these fibres. Likewise the Brunonian system of John Brown (1735-88), in which life-force was measured according to excitability, led to far more anxiety around the exhaustion caused by over-excitation than that caused by excessive inertia. Excessive sexual activity was cited as an example of such over-excitation. And Theophile de Bordeu (1722-76), who expanded upon ‘Bruonianism’ with a special emphasis on the lymphatic glands, saw the secretion of semen as drawing on the body’s vital essences, leading ultimately to debility if abused.¹² Much eighteenth-century sexual discourse tended to express antithetical ideas, such as the harmfulness of continence and the necessity of regular sexual activity for health; and these too continued into the nineteenth century, eventually evolving into the secular, pseudo-Freudian sense that sexual repression is dangerous. But the eighteenth-century integration of the fear of sexual loss and the idea of productive continence into the new medical discourses of ‘nerves’, ‘tone’, and ‘energy’ also had a profound effect upon thinking about sexuality in the nineteenth century.¹³

¹² See Vern Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 19-21.

¹³ For more on the discourse of ‘energy’ in the nineteenth century, see Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990).

In 1858, William Acton grumbled over the way in which ‘long exploded scientific opinions linger in the public mind’, particularly sexual ideas. It was not haematic theory he complained of, but the belief that emission involved ‘the actual passage of brain down the spinal cord’. He reports an anecdote in which he heard ‘one man of the world informing another’ about ‘a noted old libertine’ who had ‘long since ceased to emit semen’, but in whom ‘under unnatural excitement, the substance of the brain was now passing away in the venereal orgasm, as was proved by the great nervous depression which followed each sexual effort’.¹⁴ This admittedly extreme conception of the sexual body is physiologically distant from haematic theory; and yet its notion of something precious lost through sexual activity binds the two theories together as examples of a loss-and-gain approach to sexuality. It would not be difficult to imagine an intellectual equivalent to the libertine described above, an artist or scholar whose continence protects the brain and increases intellectual power. Acton’s use of this anecdote as an illustration of medically defunct ideas may be because, as Mason claims, he ‘does not wholly lose touch with the belief that it is a fraction of the blood’.¹⁵ Acton does not explicitly say this, though he occasionally implies that blood is necessary to the process: he certainly asserts that sexual excitement could be avoided by redirecting blood away from the organs through exercise, and that desire was connected to the creation of semen.¹⁶ Rather, he maintains the possibility that the loss or violence involved in ejaculation could impact negatively upon the entire system, and allows this logic to remain loose enough to satisfy a range of readers with various ideas concerning the sexual body.

¹⁴ William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, in Adult Age, and in Advanced Life: Considered in their Physiological, Social, and Psychological Relations*, 2nd ed. revised (London: John Churchill, 1858; first published 1857), 39.

¹⁵ Mason, *Victorian Sexuality*, 193.

¹⁶ Acton, *Functions and Disorders*, 40.

Acton's work provides a useful index to some of the different systems of sexual function that incorporated a loss-and-gain logic in the mid- and late nineteenth century. His *Functions and Disorders of the Generative Organs* (1857) was enormously popular throughout the century; Havelock Ellis in 1910 wrote that it 'sets forth the traditional English view' on sexuality.¹⁷ Acton's comments about female sexual response, or the lack of such, were not typical of the period, but his concern over male sexuality certainly was, and his preoccupations, the kinds of sexual logic he is evidently keen to maintain, are a likely match for popular ideas.¹⁸ Like Smyth, he is categorized by Mason as a 'fringe-doctor'. *Functions and Disorders* is addressed to a lay audience, made up it is assumed – particularly in its later editions – of young middle-class men, and Acton was well known as a practitioner dealing primarily with sexual dysfunctions. John Addington Symonds, telling in his *Memoirs* of his sufferings from 'seminal losses' as a young man, reports that he 'went to Acton and allowed him to cauterize me through the urethra': a common though extremely painful treatment for seminal disorders.¹⁹ Such fringe-doctors, eager not to lose touch either with up-to-date medical opinion or lay beliefs, were, as Mason has argued, most likely to reflect the average popular opinion on sexual topics.²⁰

The question of whether continence was healthy or unhealthy was a source of considerable tension and disagreement within the medical profession throughout the century. Some thought it damaging to the reproductive system of both sexes, leading to atrophy of the genitals through disuse, as well as to congestion of semen in men and the equivalent (whatever that was imagined to be) in women. This often seems to

¹⁷ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 6, *Sex in Relation to Society*, 2nd ed. revised (Philadelphia: F. A Davis, 1921; first published 1910), 191.

¹⁸ For the fall and rise of Acton's respectability as a historical source, see Lesley A. Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 15-17.

¹⁹ John Addington Symonds, *Memoirs*, ed. Phyllis Grosskurth (London: Hutchinson, 1984), 122, 151.

²⁰ Mason, *Victorian Sexuality*, 180, 191-92.

have led doctors into the uncomfortable position of having to recommend illicit sexual relations to young men not in a position to marry. Symonds remembers Sir Spencer Wells, surgeon to Queen Victoria, having (much to Symonds's repugnance) 'recommended cohabitation with a hired mistress, or, what was better, matrimony'.²¹ Such recommendations of course do not seem to have been extended to women, despite the fact that the idea of the destructiveness of continence was much more consistently asserted by the medical profession in relation to women, though this did not stop lay writers like Vernon Lee from imagining for women healthfully continent states.²²

Functions and Disorders firmly supports the notion that continence was conducive to health, but vacillates in its rationalization. Acton claimed to believe a vigorous, healthful continence to be 'a natural state in the healthy adult', with 'sexual suffering' caused by either periods of incontinence, or what he calls 'half-continence' (thinking about sexual subjects).²³ He is nevertheless scornful of the idea that semen is literally reabsorbed into the body. 'It is', he reports, 'a generally received impression that semen once secreted can be reabsorbed into the circulation, giving buoyancy to the feelings, and that manly vigour which characterizes the male'. He continues, 'my experience goes counter to this theory, and I cannot bring myself to its adoption, notwithstanding the weight of authority in its favour'.²⁴ He does not, however, abandon the idea that something vital is lost during sexual activity, and something valuable gained from the maintenance of a continent state. Having dismissed the idea that the actual semen is a precious, health-giving substance, Acton must account for why its ejaculation is considered damaging to the system. That it is

²¹ Symonds, *Memoirs*, 151.

²² See Mason, *Victorian Sexuality*, 217.

²³ Acton, *Functions and Disorders*, 43, 19.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 42, 43, 44.

damaging he never questions: like so many others throughout the century, Acton not only ascribed the worst possible consequences to sexual excess, particularly (though not only) through masturbation, but also subscribed to the pathology of ‘spermatorrhoea’, a disease in which sexual excess was thought to cause continual involuntary loss of semen, partly through nocturnal emissions, but also in urine and stools, causing impotence and general debility.²⁵ Occasionally he indulges in blatant self-contradiction, referring to ‘the importance of the fluid semen, which young men would thus lavishly expend’ (for more information on this topic he refers readers to the page on which he denies that semen itself is necessary to health). Elsewhere he offers rationalizations that draw liberally on different conceptions of how the body manages resources. ‘In accordance with natural laws’, he says, ‘the expenditure of vital force in one direction diverts it from others’.²⁶ This continues an older manner of referring to the body as an economy, a system analogous to that of other economies, in which health relied on the proper management and balancing of intake and expenditure.²⁷ It may also reflect an application by analogy to the body of the more specifically nineteenth-century theory, in the area of physical energy, of the laws of thermodynamics, which stressed the limited nature of energy and its tendency to entropy. Many French and German medical researchers at this time were broadly preoccupied with ‘the law of energy conservation’ as applied to the ‘human machine’, and Acton himself trained for three years in Paris.²⁸

²⁵ For more about the history of ‘spermatorrhoea’ and its relation with the medical establishment, see Mason, *Victorian Sexuality*, 295-98.

²⁶ Acton, *Functions and Disorders*, 15, 8.

²⁷ See John Allen’s (1771-1843) translation of an extract from the first volume of Georges Cuvier’s *Leçons d’Anatomie Comparée* (1800) as *An Introduction to the Study of the Animal Economy* (Edinburgh: Ross and Blackwood, 1801). Allen is described on the title page as ‘Lecturer on the Animal Economy at Edinburgh’.

²⁸ See Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 64-68.

Ben Barker-Benfield has called the application of this bodily system to sexuality the ‘spermatic economy’.²⁹ It underlies a great deal of Victorian thinking, especially lay thinking, and about male sexuality in particular. But like haematic theory, the phrase ‘spermatic economy’ can be misleading if used to describe all sexual rationalization in the period. Above all, it falsely suggests the centrality of actual semen. For others, like Acton, who (at least some of the time) treated such literalism with suspicion, sexual function became part of a delicately balanced physiological system ruled by a mysterious power, energy, or force. Within this system, all functions are intimately connected via their equal reliance on this central force, and one set of functions can have great influence over the others through their management of it. Hence Acton’s attention to ‘*regime*’ as a means of managing sexual desire: with the right digestion, and muscular exercise, a constitution can be cultivated within which sexual desire has a minimal place.

Acton wrote at a time when physiological ways of understanding sexual function were in the process of giving way to nervous or mental ones: what Arnold I. Davidson calls the movement from ‘anatomical’ to ‘psychiatric’ models (though overemphasis on this division can obscure the extent to which the ‘nerves’ were conceived of in a determinedly physical manner in the latter half of the nineteenth century, as Davidson himself notes).³⁰ Another reason given by Acton for the dangers of sexual activity was the damage done by orgasm to the nervous system. ‘I think’, he writes, ‘with many modern writers, that there is a good deal of evidence now existing which shows that shocks constantly received and frequently repeated on the great ganglionic centres may produce irritation in them, thus causing many of the obscure

²⁹ Ben Barker-Benfield, ‘The Spermatic Economy: A Nineteenth Century View of Sexuality’, *Feminist Studies*, 1:1 (Summer, 1972), 45-74.

³⁰ Arnold I. Davidson, *The Emergence of Sexuality: Historical Epistemology and the Formation of Concepts* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 32.

forms of disease to which we have hitherto failed in discovering a key'.³¹ These shocks, with a moderate frequency (for Acton no more than once every seven or ten days) should, he says, be easy for the healthy adult male to recover from, but were dangerous for all others, while excessive shock was inadvisable for anyone: again, the boundaries of 'excessive' are pliable. As the importance of actual seminal loss waned in the mid-nineteenth century, a renewed emphasis on the interrelation between the sexual organs and the brain and nervous system ensured the reinforcement, rather than decline, of the idea that sexual activity was physically and mentally damaging. An editorial, for example, in *The Lancet* in 1892, claiming to answer the question, 'What are the physiological facts that ought to be proclaimed by the medical profession?' states that 'the sexual act is a physiological nerve storm, and not simply an act of secretion'; it 'does not depend upon the testicle, but upon the spinal chord'. The same editorial also placed the possibility of healthful continence among these 'facts'. 'Common as is sexual vice', it says, 'continence is not unknown among us', while to the claim that continence causes atrophy of the testicles, it returns, 'such argument is utterly fallacious [...]. Facts in abundance prove the contrary'.³²

For many medical writers – especially after Darwin's *The Descent of Man* (1871), which allocated responsibility for sexuality to the nervous system – 'nervous energy' acted as a compromise between the older notion of 'vital force' and the renewed emphasis on the nervous system as a central regulatory system of the body. Donald Campbell Black, for example, in his *On the Functional Diseases of the Urinary and Reproductive Organs*, allocated far more importance to the brain and the nervous system, especially the spinal chord, than had Acton, though his system of

³¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

³² [Unsigned], 'Sexual Physiology', *The Lancet*, 140:3610 (5 November, 1892), 1055.

bodily function is still for the most part determinedly anatomical.³³ This was particularly true in the final quarter of the century, when talk of ‘neurasthenia’ – a diseased state in which the nerves or nerve endings were said to be eroded or exhausted – occupied public and to some extent professional medical discourse.³⁴ One of its popularisers, the American George Beard (1839-83), posited that the body had two types of energy: ‘active’ energy that was used daily, and reserves of energy that were stored in the nervous system. In a reversion to the model of spermatoc loss and gain, it was the body’s constant application to these reserves that caused nervous exhaustion. Beard theorized a category of neurasthenia called ‘sexual neurasthenia’, the symptoms of which were identical with those commonly attributed to masturbatory disease or spermatorrhoea.³⁵ Though neurasthenia was less popular as an official diagnosis in England than it was in America and Germany, its conception of ‘nervous energy’ as something one must carefully monitor and cultivate, and ‘nervous exhaustion’ as a condition to be feared nevertheless made its way into popular usage, and in many ways acted as code for sexual debility, as had phrases such as ‘nervous weakness’ in the eighteenth century.³⁶

The tenacity of the idea that both health in general and sexuality in particular were regulated in a way comparable with that of energy in the physical world can be seen in the work of two writers who dominated early twentieth-century sexual discourse: Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis. Anson Rabinbach, in his study of

³³ Donald Campbell Black, *On the Functional Diseases of the Urinary and Reproductive Organs*, 2nd ed. revised (London: J. A. Churchill, 1875; first published 1872).

³⁴ For more on the sociology of neurasthenia, including its relative popularity as a diagnosis in different countries, see Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter eds, *Cultures of Neurasthenia from Beard to the First World War* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001).

³⁵ George M. Beard, *Sexual Neurasthenia (Nervous Exhaustion): Its Hygiene, Causes, Symptoms, and Treatment, with a Chapter on Diet for the Nervous*, ed. A. D. Rockwell (New York: E. B. Treat, 1884).

³⁶ See Marijke Gijswijt-Hofstra and Roy Porter, ‘Introduction’, in *Cultures of Neurasthenia*, 1-24; 5. For similar discourses in the eighteenth century, see Roy Porter, ‘The Literature of Sex Advice Before 1800’, in Roy Porter and Mikuláš Teich eds, *Sexual Knowledge, Sexual Science: A History of Attitudes to Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 134-57.

‘energy’ in nineteenth-century Europe, claims that Freud was among those who ‘transposed the energetic model of nature to sexuality’, rebranding ‘nervous’ energy, with its stubborn cleaving to anatomy, as ‘psychic’ or ‘sexual’ energy. He viewed this ‘sexual energy’ as having a close relationship to the impulse to all action in life, and in his later writings sexuality often seems coextensive with this impulse.³⁷ And yet for Freud ‘psychic energy’ is, like physical energy, a limited quality, with the difference that man’s replenishment of such energy is by no means so certain as that of physical energy. ‘Since a man does not have unlimited quantities of psychical energy at his disposal, he has to accomplish his tasks by making an expedient distribution of his libido.’ It is this need for ‘distribution’ that in part leads to the idea of sublimation, in which frustrated psychic-sexual energy is redirected towards the accomplishing of non-sexual tasks, such as the building of stable societies and the creation of art works. Within this scheme, neurosis takes the place that seminal loss had occupied for the nineteenth century, and Freud laments the prevalence of imperfect distribution, and therefore the ‘useless waste of a large quota of energy which might have been employed for the improvement of the human lot’.³⁸ Elsewhere he directly relates his doubts about the general practicability of sublimation to the thermodynamic law of entropy: ‘A conversion of psychical instinctual force into various forms of activity can perhaps no more be achieved without loss than a conversion of physical forces.’³⁹

In Freud’s later work, sexuality finds itself in an exactly opposite position from that it had taken in nineteenth-century discourse. Rather than sexual activity taking energy from other bodily processes, we find that the non-sexual activity of

³⁷ Rabinbach, *The Human Motor*, 9.

³⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, in *Complete Psychological Works: Standard Edition*, vol. 21, ed. and trans. James Strachey *et al.* (London: Hogarth Press, 1961; originally published in German as ‘Das Unbehagen in der Kultur’ in 1930), 64-145; 103, 78.

³⁹ Sigmund Freud, ‘Leonardo Da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood’, in *ibid.*, vol. 11 (1978; originally published in German as ‘Eine Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci’, 1910), 63-137; 75.

civilization requires that ‘a large amount of the psychical energy which it uses for its own purposes [...] be withdrawn from sexuality’.⁴⁰ This line of thinking becomes misogynistic with an ease surely not owed purely to logic, when Freud claims that ‘women are little capable’ of the sublimations necessary for civilization, and so remain ‘hostile’ to it, representative instead of ‘the interests of the family and of sexual life’.⁴¹ Freud seems to understand ‘psychic energy’ to work in a similar manner to physical energy, whether literally or by analogy. One may remember that an earlier Freud also supported the idea that masturbation was harmful, though his reason was that it was ‘linked with the autoerotic sexual activities of early childhood’ and therefore might make one vulnerable ‘to the numerous varieties of neuroses and psychoses which are conditional on an involution of the sexual life to its infantile forms’. It also ‘vitiates the character through *indulgence*’.⁴²

In England, Havelock Ellis developed ideas similar to Freud’s ‘sublimation’ in his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* (1897-1910, with a supplementary volume in 1928). At the turn of the century, as Hall notes, ‘Acton as approved expert was succeeded by Havelock Ellis, greeted as a sound English voice on a subject largely identified with Continentals’.⁴³ Ellis was less concerned with whether or not one practiced sexual continence, than with the manner in which one conducted one’s sexual life, continent or otherwise. He despised continence, virginity, and celibacy imposed from without, ‘all the unnatural and empty forms of chastity’,⁴⁴ blindly followed as convention or religious rule and at odds with one’s temperament. But he

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 103-04.

⁴² Sigmund Freud, “‘Civilized’ Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness”, in *Complete Psychological Works: Standard Edition*, vol. 9, ed. and trans. James Strachey *et al.* (London: Hogarth Press, 1959; originally published in German as ‘Die Kulturelle Sexualmoral Und Die Moderne Nervosität’, 1908), 177-204; 199-200. Italics are the author’s.

⁴³ Lesley A. Hall, ‘Sexual Cultures in Britain: Some Persisting Themes’, in Franz X. Eder, *et al.* eds, *Sexual Cultures in Europe: National Histories* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), 29-52; 41.

⁴⁴ Ellis, *Sex in Relation to Society*, 144.

also advocated what he called ‘a return to the older and sounder conception of chastity’, a practice that is ‘a virtue because it is a discipline of self-control, because it helps to fortify the character and will’.⁴⁵ Like Freud (from whom he quotes), Ellis imagines sexuality as a psychological category, and so doubts the possibility of total sexual abstinence, which would mean rendering ‘the whole psychic field a *tabula rasa* so far as sexual activity is concerned’.⁴⁶ Instead, his ‘chastity’ involves a deliberate cultivation and concentration of the sexual impulse, in order to experience not only intensification of physical sensation, but also an integration of body and soul that constitutes Ellis’s own moral-sexual ideal. Erotic gratification, he says:

can only be attained by placing impediments in the way of the swift and direct gratification of sexual desire, by compelling it to increase its force, to take long circuits, to charge the whole organism so highly that the final climax of gratified love is not the trivial detumescence of a petty desire but the immense consummation of a longing in which the whole soul as well as the whole body has its part.

He quotes H. G. Wells and Edward Carpenter as expressing similar ideals of what he calls ‘erotic chastity’; a theme that was also developed by George Moore, who like Ellis belonged to the community of literary men living in the Temple in the 1890s.⁴⁷

However, Ellis’s sexual schema alters when he treats the sexuality of artists or intellectuals, and comes much closer to the older discourse of productive sexual continence. Freud had found that artists were somehow more successful in sublimation than other men. ‘What an artist creates’, he states, ‘provides at the same time an outlet for his sexual desire’, though he regrets that it is impossible to account for this fact, as it is ‘just here that our capacities fail us’.⁴⁸ Ellis too says that ‘chastity

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 170, 171, 155.

⁴⁸ Freud, ‘Leonardo’, 132.

has a more special value for those who cultivate the arts', and that 'the masters of all the more intensely emotional arts have frequently cultivated a high degree of chastity'. In accounting for this apparent fact, he resorts to a familiar physiology of energy regulation.

We do well to remember that, while the auto-erotic manifestations through the brain are of infinite variety and importance, the brain and the sexual organs are yet the great rivals in using up bodily energy, and that there is an antagonism between extreme bodily vigor and extreme sexual vigor, even though they may sometimes both appear at different periods in the same individual.⁴⁹

Ellis approaches the artist's continence as an unfortunate by-product of an eccentric vocation, rather than a practice deliberately engaged in, concluding that 'a high degree of energy, whether in athletics or in intellect or in sexual activity, is unfavourable to the display of energy in other directions. Every high degree of potency has its related impotencies'.⁵⁰ And yet his work and Freud's suggest that the idea of the continent artist particularly lingered even beyond the physiology that made sense of it, forcing those who sought at the beginning of the twentieth century to classify and explain sexuality to incorporate it into seemingly contrary sexual models.

Medical Culture:

(ii) Popular Medicine

Medical writers such as Acton and Ellis represent the verge of respectable medical discourse on sexual topics. On one side of this boundary, professional medical men (and in some cases, women) argued through pamphlets and medical journals on

⁴⁹ Ellis, *Sex in Relation to Society*, 172, 173-174.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

sexual topics that would split opinion throughout the century: was continence damaging? Just how dangerous was masturbation? One precept that generally went unquestioned was that sexual excess was physically damaging to the whole bodily system, though 'excess' was a fluid category. On the other side, overlapping significantly with Acton's discourse but more melodramatic and mercenary was the vast body of 'quack' literature. Quack medical discourse did much to reinforce popular opinion concerning bodily function, especially concerning the dangers of sexual loss.

Though 'quackery', a term that was becoming increasingly well defined in the Victorian period by its opposition to a newly legitimized, state-endorsed medical profession, saw a decline in the nineteenth century in comparison with the eighteenth, it was nevertheless ubiquitous in everyday Victorian life.⁵¹ As Lesley Hall's research has shown, quack notices warning against 'sexual debility', 'nervous debility', 'seminal weakness', 'nervous exhaustion', and 'secret diseases' adorned billboards in all metropolitan centres, and especially in the university towns; they were handed to people, mostly young men of all classes, on the main thoroughfares of cities; they were posted in public urinals; they were mailed to men of an age and position to be likely to worry about such things and to have funds to spend on them.⁵² Adverts for books and special cures were found in almost all newspapers. Such quacks were said to make vast fortunes from the sexual fears of their patrons. Family dynasties operated under various names, and colluded with one another: the Jordan family, for example, was seemingly responsible for the notorious practices Perry & Co., Harvey

⁵¹ See Roy Porter, *Quacks*, 205-06.

⁵² See Hall, *Hidden Anxieties*, 56-59.

& Co., Cooper & Co., and Bright & Co.⁵³ Others such as the Kahn brothers operated internationally through anatomical museums that offered, along with wax models of the healthy human body, pathological models of the stages of masturbatory disease and spermatorrhoea. 'Such museums', reports Lesley Hall, 'were run as a "come-on" and a front by publishers of quack pamphlets and purveyors of spurious remedies for factitious ailments'.⁵⁴ The viewing of their 'gruesome' waxworks would be followed by lectures on the dangers of sexual excess (purchasable in pamphlet form), and an invitation to consult a doctor promising (for a price) guaranteed cure. Some quacks were said to maintain close connections with loan lenders who would lend large sums of money for consultation fees and expensive medicines, before quickly turning to blackmail and menacing in order to realize these funds. In 1864 the trial of Dr Henerey for so blackmailing one Montague Augustus Clarke, a young military man whom he had treated for 'spermatorrhoea', attracted much attention.⁵⁵ It would be difficult, if not impossible, for any man and many women to have remained entirely unaware of the nature of the 'debility' these quacks claimed to cure.⁵⁶

Some of them promised cures for venereal diseases, especially gonorrhoea and syphilis. The audience for these disorders, however, was small compared with the potential audience for communications fostering anxiety about seminal loss, for which venereal infections were sometimes mistaken. Any man could potentially come to think himself suffering from this disorder, as it was often claimed that semen drained away unnoticed in the urine or stool. The physiology of quack literature is repetitive, and varies only in degree, depending on how professional the quack in question was

⁵³ F. B. Courtenay, *Revelations of Quacks and Quackery: A Series of Letters by 'Detector' Reprinted from 'The Medical Circular'*, 10th ed. (London: Bailliere, Tindall & Cox, 1885; first published 1865), 59.

⁵⁴ Hall, *Hidden Anxieties*, 59.

⁵⁵ Courtenay, *Revelations*, ix-x, 1-4, 1. For an example of newspaper coverage of Dr Henerey's trial, see 'Law and Police', *The Examiner* (29 October, 1864), 700-1.

⁵⁶ Lesley Hall makes a similar point, see *Hidden Anxieties*, 62.

feigning to be. In general, the more popular and shamelessly melodramatic the quack, the more likely he was to claim that semen itself was a vital substance, ‘the most important of all the animal fluids’; that at least part of unejaculated semen, ‘designed for the invigoration of his own body’, was reabsorbed; and that it was created from the blood. *The Warning Voice* (circulating widely in the late 1850s and claiming to be in its 63rd edition in 1860) a pamphlet often blamed for the suicide of young men, claims that ‘the greatest part of this seed *is absorbed into the blood*, and produces on its return surprising changes. *It causes the beard and hair to grow*, and in short, may be looked upon as the *very essence of existence*’. ‘Excessive loss of semen’, it continues, ‘must therefore be highly detrimental to the whole system’.⁵⁷ A pamphlet from roughly the same time advertising ‘Sir Astley Cooper’s Vital Restorative’ (nothing to do with Sir Astley Cooper himself) proceeds in a similar fashion, warning against ‘the *immoderate loss* of the system’s *most important fluid*’. ‘Who can doubt’, it declares, ‘of the great importance of that most essential fluid in the animal economy?’⁵⁸ One ‘Dr Hammond’ even advertised as curative a ‘seminal replenisher’, which would ‘not only create erectile power and brain matter, but likewise replenishes the seminal fluid’. This was handily ‘prepared in small phials, which can be carried in the waistcoat-pocket’.⁵⁹

But a latitudinarian approach to bodily function was also generally maintained, allowing for the different sexual beliefs of potential readers. The ‘Vital Restorative’ pamphlet refers, like Acton, to a more balanced view of bodily economy when it states that ‘all parts of the body may fail in their office and true performance

⁵⁷ Henry Smith, *The Warning Voice: Or, Private Medical Friend*, 63rd ed. (London: self-published: 1860), 17, 15, 24. For its involvement in suicide cases, see Courtenay, *Revelations*, 54, 71. Italics are the author’s. The nature of quack publications is so ephemeral as to make exact knowledge of publication history impossible; I have generally given references to easily available editions.

⁵⁸ Harvey and Co., *Short Account of Sir Astley Cooper’s Vital Restorative* (London: Harvey and Co., 1863), 2, 19-20.

⁵⁹ See Courtenay, *Revelations*, 18.

of their relative duties, either by a deficiency in their own or deprivation and injury from other parts', and picks up on the fashion for 'nerves' in lamenting the 'undue excitement affecting the central ganglia of the sympathetic nervous system' caused by sexual excesses.⁶⁰ A slightly earlier production, which was nevertheless reprinted and plagiarized throughout the century, Samuel La'Mert's *Self-Preservation*, is similarly hazy about what is lost through sexual excesses, referring to a 'most curiously elaborate secretion from the blood' that may 'be returned and received into the mass of circulating blood', but also to the 'loss of nervous or sensorial energy, – of that power which, carefully guarded, is our surest protection in warding off the attacks of disease, and our most powerful ally in resisting its noxious agency when present'. La'Mert also claimed that it was the energy taken to replenish spermatic stores that caused exhaustion, as 'all the energies of manhood are necessary to replace it'.⁶¹ One cannot expect such ostentatiously unscientific literature to maintain a cohesive, rational model of bodily function. But it is notable that, in all their variations, they clearly seek to preserve an underlying narrative: sexual activity is dangerous because it involves some kind of loss, whether of semen, energy (nervous or otherwise), or vital force; this loss is detrimental not only to the reproductive organs, but to the entire bodily system; and it is likely that conservation of this quantity would yield increased health and happiness. This literature occasionally mentioned prolonged sexual continence as a further cause of debility and illness.⁶² This is to be expected of works that fed primarily on male fear of sexual impotence: those who intend to remain continent do not worry so much about sexual debility, while the assertion that continence as well as masturbation or sexual excess could cause the wide range of

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 10, 15.

⁶¹ Samuel La'Mert, *Self-Preservation: A Popular Inquiry into the Concealed Causes of those Obscure and Neglected Disorders of the Generative System* (Manchester: self-published, 1841), 12, 17, 12, 18, 20.

⁶² See *ibid.*, 4.

ailments listed ensured that absolutely all men were potential addressees. But it is highly likely that the sheer loudness with which the quacks pedalled their wares, combined with the more reserved but physiologically similar statements of many professional doctors, worked to preserve and reinforce in lay minds the idea of a sexual economy. This idea did not go unquestioned in the century, nor did it hold an exclusive place in sexual discourse, but it did form a continuity between quack and professional medical writing about sexuality, and most likely reflected a popular opinion.

Later in the century, medical research became increasingly fascinated by deviant sexuality. As the emergent discipline of sexology catalogued the many and various forms taken by sexual desire and activity, attention gradually moved from sexuality as a bodily function to sexual psychology. But sexology and sexual psychology, including Freudianism, had a limited reception in Britain until well into the twentieth century, and even then was largely combined with older ideas rather than replacing them wholesale. Meanwhile, the medicalized discourse of sexual loss and gain made its way into many emergent popular genres concerned with the ordering of life. One of these was advice for young men. The culture surrounding the moral and physical integrity of ‘young men’ and, to a certain extent, ‘young women’ in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries produced a similar rhetoric to quack literature. Though its motivations were perhaps less exclusively mercantile, they often had as much reason to cultivate outdated medical models in order to emphasize the potential dangers of sexual activity and advantages of continence. This was almost entirely a religious culture, though its language (at least in Britain) was highly secularized, as it drew on earlier cultures of Christian manliness or ‘muscular Christianity’ to create what Norman Vance calls ‘a breezy practical morality without

oppressively religious connotations'.⁶³ It was blithely multi-denominational, with little difference in rhetoric between its nonconformist, Anglican, and Catholic branches, and involved a combination of on-the-street campaigning and leafleting, the setting up of clubs, societies and lecture halls, and a mass of advice literature in the shape of magazines, journals, and books.

These last were also repetitive, normally advising the presumed young reader on the attainment of mental, physical, and moral excellence, with a more or less explicitly religious framework. Almost all of them addressed the importance of avoiding sexual encounters before marriage, either with women (prostitutes or otherwise) or with oneself through 'self-abuse'; and placed this continence within a physical and moral regime. In the medically-conscious Victorian period this required some degree of physiological justification. The sexual discussion in these pamphlets and magazines was almost always less melodramatic and less medically detailed than that of quack literature, at least in England before the turn of the century (the American equivalent came much closer to quack rhetoric). But young men of the period reading both would have received a fairly consistent sense that sexual activity involved a dangerous loss, and that continence could yield increased strength both mental and physical. One such young man, Charles Sayle – later friend to Lionel Johnson and librarian of the University Library, Cambridge – records in his diary that he was given at the age of fourteen (1878) by an elder brother, John Stuart Blackie's *On Self-Culture: Intellectual, Physical, and Moral*, which describes itself as 'a *vade mecum* for young men and students'.⁶⁴ This book, like so many others, presented a model of the body as a delicately balanced system, in which the over-use of one

⁶³ Norman Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit: The Ideal of Christian Manliness in Victorian Literature and Religious Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 169.

⁶⁴ Diary of Charles Sayle 1864-96, Cambridge, University Library, *Charles Edward Sayle: Diaries and Letters*, GBR/0012/MS Add. 8501, 264.

system depleted others. Within this rule, Blackie states that young men must ‘learn to recognise the great truth that those are the strongest men, not who the most wantonly indulge, but who the most carefully curb their activities’. ‘All debauch’, he writes, ‘is incipient suicide; it is the unseen current beneath the house which sooner or later washes away the foundations’.⁶⁵ It is not difficult to see how the medical discourse of spermatic retention could match up easily with the Christian discourse of life as a battle between what another such advice book calls ‘animal nature’ and ‘spiritual nature’.⁶⁶

Others were more explicit in addressing sexual behaviour. Hugh Sinclair Paterson, a Glasgow-educated doctor and nonconformist minister, produced the popular *Life, Function, Health: Studies for Young Men* (1885). In the section on health – also sold separately as *Health Studies* – he outlines a theory of bodily regulation in which one manages the balance between intake and output of energy. But although, when speaking of the muscles, he stresses that ‘we cannot be too frequently renewing ourselves’, his logic differs when speaking of sexuality. This he treats as an appetite rather than a muscular activity, the satisfaction of which is both unnecessary and potentially very harmful. ‘A man may live all his days celibate’, he says, ‘and not suffer in the slightest degree in health [...]. We may maintain the utmost vigour, and engage in all the work that is needful, and reach a ripe old age without the slightest indulgence of this appetite’. On the other hand, sexual activity is an ‘expenditure of energy’, in which ‘the expenditure is large in proportion to the excitement’. Paterson does not explicitly mention semen, and does not need to; his theory of a body regulated by energy is sufficient to rationalize the danger of sexual excess, though he gives no reason why this activity wastes more energy than any

⁶⁵ John Stuart Blackie, *On Self-Culture: Intellectual, Physical, and Moral: A Vade Mecum for Young Men and Students*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1874), 74.

⁶⁶ John Thain Davidson, *Talks With Young Men* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1884), 78.

other. He is vague about what constitutes excess, but firm that all activity followed by ‘a feeling of weakness and vapidness’ is excessive. Such excess, he claims, damages the entire body, as ‘it withdraws power from the different functions that might be otherwise needfully used’. This withdrawal, he claims, ‘is often to be blamed for weakness of the digestive organs; very frequently it is to be blamed for weakness of judgement and weakness of the brain’. Further, ‘it tells very injuriously on the whole frame, and it tells most injuriously on the most vital and important part – the nervous system’.⁶⁷

This element of ‘young men’ culture found its most emphatic expression in the many organizations associated with the late nineteenth-century ‘social purity’ movement, particularly the White Cross Army or League, founded in 1883 and dedicated to persuading young men to take vows of chastity, and the Young Man’s Christian Association (YMCA), founded in 1868 and by the end of the century much more about secular self-cultivation and physical education than prayer. A large part of this culture consisted of lectures, given by men and women who were very often also or originally nonconformist preachers, taken on tour around the country and indeed the world, and often published in the form of pamphlets that attracted huge international sales. Hugh Sinclair Paterson’s book, for example, was originally a series of lectures given to YMCA audiences.⁶⁸ Along with threats of the dangers of sexual excesses that rivalled the similar lectures given at anatomical museums, these lectures often included promises of the felicity and strength to be gained through sexual continence. In 1883, the social purity journal *The Sentinel* reported a lecture by Dr Edward Wood Forster to the North East District Union of YMCAs, in which he spoke ‘strongly not only of the moral obligation of continence and self-restraint, but

⁶⁷ H. Sinclair Paterson, *Life, Function, Health: Studies for Young Men*, 3 vols (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1885) vol. 3, 34, 134-35, 136, 127, 136.

⁶⁸ According to an unsigned review in the *Spectator* (29 January, 1881), 26.

of their benefit alike to body and intellect'.⁶⁹ Another lecturer, Henry Varley, spoke of how 'the strength of the brain, the richness of the blood, the brilliance of the eye, the vigour of the mind, the hardness of the muscle and the firmness of the flesh' were all 'mainly dependent on the seed'.⁷⁰ Varley's *Lecture to Men Only* toured internationally, and the related pamphlet is said to have sold 90,000 copies.⁷¹ The same discourse of positive continence was still present in the literature of the Scouting Movement, established in 1907. As late as 1922, Baden-Powell was writing in his *Rovering to Success* that a man's retained semen 'gives the vigour of manhood to his frame, and it builds up his nerves and courage'.⁷² This publication served as the handbook for the Rover Scout section of the Scout Association until 1966, and was distributed in this version to 200,000 scouts.⁷³ It is not quite true, then, as Edward Bristow has claimed, that social purity discourse was 'entirely negative': though it may well have understood sexuality as, as Bristow has it, 'a nasty appetite to be curbed by faith, cold water and lessons in good citizenship',⁷⁴ its conception of continence was more than simple negative suppression, as those involved hoped to gain health and happiness.

Much work has been done on the connections between such organizations, and the promotion of empire, eugenics, and race hatred, as well as their role in the middle-class 'reformation' of working-class lifestyles.⁷⁵ These are certainly some of the

⁶⁹ [Unsigned], 'Direct Teaching to Men Upon Personal Purity', *The Sentinel*, 50 (June, 1883), 206.

⁷⁰ Quoted by Edward J. Bristow in *Vice and Vigilance: Purity Movements in Britain Since 1700* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1977), 132.

⁷¹ This figure taken from Ed Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side: Towards a Genealogy of a Discourse on Male Sexualities* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 88.

⁷² Lord (Robert) Baden-Powell, *Rovering to Success: A Book of Life-Sport for Young Men*, 2nd ed. revised (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1930; first published 1922), 104.

⁷³ Bristow, *Vice and Vigilance*, 140.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁷⁵ See Joseph Bristow, *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man's World* (London: Harper Collins Academic, 1991); Philip Holden and Richard Ruppel eds, *Imperial Desire: Dissident Sexualities and Colonial Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); John Kucich, *Imperial Masochism: British Fiction, Fantasy, and Social Class* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

political purposes to which the discourse of productive sexual continence was put in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But this was a contingent, rather than necessary connection. Already by the mid-nineteenth century the discourse was pervasive and multifarious enough to prevent this association from becoming necessary, as is seen in the formation of a different branch in writing of the Aesthetic Movement. Mason has written of the ‘difficulty in defining the clinical equivalent of the politically – or even the medico-politically – “progressive”’, as ‘different medical dogmas about sexual function cannot readily be correlated with conservative or reforming elements in the medical profession’.⁷⁶ The same can be said of medical theory outside of the medical profession, as no clear correspondence can be found between specific ideas and political orientation.

Another genre with significant overlap with that of advice to young men, not least because of a similar association with the ‘social purity’ movement (along with eugenics, empire, and race), was the literature of late nineteenth-century first-wave feminism. The literature of this movement had close relations with Aesthetic writing in the last quarter of the century, as has been shown by critics such as Sally Ledger, Talia Schaffer, and Ruth Livesey.⁷⁷ The early suffragist approach to sexuality was anything but homogenous, with a good deal of disagreement between women about fundamental sexual physiology, and some deploying various sexual models as the situation demanded. Some early feminists argued for what was called ‘free love’, though in England this normally represented the right to unmarried unions with a single man, rather than general promiscuity. The majority, however, advocated sexual

⁷⁶ Mason, *Victorian Sexuality*, 178-79.

⁷⁷ Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 94-121; Talia Schaffer, *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 15-25; Ruth Livesey, *Socialism, Sex, and the Culture of Aestheticism in Britain, 1880-1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 73-101, 132-60.

continence outside of and occasionally within marriage, often subscribing like the writers of 'young men' literature to the widespread discourse of 'higher' and 'lower' selves, in which the 'lower' represented sensual feelings and behaviour.⁷⁸ A significant portion found strength in periodic or lifelong continence, which they associated with individual happiness and social usefulness. Writing about this positive continence occasionally uses rhetoric reminiscent of that of male productive continence.

In advocating sexual continence, particularly voluntary lifelong celibacy, women were going against dominant medical discourse. The nineteenth-century medical profession was more unanimous on the question of the damage done to health by female continence than they were on the male equivalent. Some feminists, such as Olive Schreiner and Jane Clapperton, were inclined to agree that continence endangered women: Schreiner said that 'a person might stifle their sexual desire by diverting their energy into other channels and yet suffer in health', while Clapperton claimed first that continence was harmful only if not freely chosen, and later that it was universally harmful, leading to 'hysteria, chlorosis, love melancholy and other unhappy ailments'.⁷⁹ But the majority of late nineteenth-century feminists strongly disagreed with this physiological model, asserting instead that continence was perfectly possible for both sexes. Some even argued that for women, at least, it could be an exalted state. This state of affairs is demonstrated in Lucy Bland's analysis of an incident in the life of the Men and Women's Club, a select intellectual society set up by Karl Pearson in the mid-1880s with the aim of encouraging debate between the sexes on sexual matters. 'The relationship of chastity to health' was of great concern to the club; most of the women were eager both to escape the imperative for women

⁷⁸ See Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism & Sexual Morality, 1885-1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), xiii.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 16, 172.

to marry, and to discourage men from claiming a right to sexual relationships on health grounds. In 1885 Dr Reginald Ryle addressed the club, according to the secretary's notes, upon on 'some physiological facts which bear upon the relations of the sexes', including 'the relation of activity or inactivity of sex relations to general health of individual'. Ryle denied that there was any relationship between the two; but two doctors present, Dr Louisa Atkins and Dr Bryan Donkin, disagreed. The discussion that followed focused almost entirely on female continence. The group was split, with the women (apart from Schreiner) and some of the men agreeing with Ryle, despite the fact that weight of medical opinion in the room pointed in the opposite direction. It is likely that this lay bias, regardless of medical opinion, reflected at least upper-middle-class progressive opinion in the latter half of the nineteenth century.⁸⁰

Given the associated male medical discourse, it was perhaps inevitable that of those feminists who asserted the viability of healthy prolonged continence for both men and women, some would go further to claim that for women at least, it could be a state even more healthy, and more conducive to personal happiness and social usefulness, than the married state. Some, like practising doctor Elizabeth Blackwell, found wider social potential in the female maternal instinct, imagined as the main force behind female sexual desire. Blackwell argued that women had the same force of sexual desire as men, but greater powers of self-control and sexual discipline. Female superiority did not rely on actual motherhood, but the potential for what she termed 'spiritual motherhood', described by Bland as 'an altruistic approach towards humanity in which a whole nation represented a woman's progeny'.⁸¹ Other feminist writers and activists, such as Margaret Shurmer Sibthorp, Francis Swiney, and Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy, while disagreeing upon other points such as the

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 15-17.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 68.

origins of male dominance and degree to which women could be thought to be superior to men, nevertheless agreed that sex should be limited to the purposes of reproduction, and that avoiding it could lead to what they all called the ‘higher life’.⁸² This sense of redirected and transformed sexuality was drawn upon and expanded by Henrietta Muller to outline an ideal of female productive continence. Muller was very active in progressive movements: she had been an executive member of the National Vigilance Association, one of the country’s more extreme ‘social purity’ organizations – although she resigned when the Association described a contraceptive pamphlet as obscene – and was active in support of the temperance and women’s suffrage movements. Muller claimed that a new type of ‘single woman’, whose attention was given to personal cultivation and public work rather than family, could be imagined as ‘rejecting the personal or the grosser form of love’ in order to make herself ‘more free to give a larger, holier and deeper love to those who need it most’. In describing the personal benefits that allow such public-spiritedness Muller echoes the discourse of masculine productive continence familiar from medical, quack, and ‘young men’ literature. ‘Her physical life’, she writes, ‘is healthy and active, she retains her buoyancy and increases her nervous power if she knows how to take care of herself, and this lesson she is rapidly learning’.⁸³ There is, of course, a long tradition of the communal usefulness of sexually inexperienced women informing Muller’s elaboration of sociable continence. Yet the terms ‘buoyancy’ and ‘nervous power’ are particularly reminiscent of the rhetoric of spermatic retention. Reasons other than bodily regulation are given for the lack of this in non-continent women (child-birth, inactivity); but what allows this recycling of language is a lingering sense

⁸² Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (London: Pandora Press, 1985), 27-53.

⁸³ [Henrietta Muller], ‘The Future of Single Women’, *Westminster Review*, 121:241 (January, 1884), 151-62; 162, 158.

that physical health may be lost through sexual activity. Muller speaks of the envy of such women felt by ‘those men whose past has been for ever robbed of the bloom which is life’s sweetest gift’, again taking advantage of the emotional discourse surrounding male continence in order to describe a female equivalent.⁸⁴ A similar kind of borrowing and echoing will be found in the work of Vernon Lee in Chapter Four.

An idea of sexual economy therefore permeated the period, being co-opted and adapted by many different groups or individuals, who had a wide range of ideological, political, religious, or mercantile motivations. This surely reflected a situation in which the majority of men, and some women, gave at least some credence to the idea that their body worked in a way compatible with such logic; in which it was, above all, plausible, whatever significance one gave that fact. This idea of continence, however, was in itself amoral, and was therefore worked into various incompatible moral and political systems, some of which were similar to that of the branch of Aestheticism described here, and some different. The next section will explore some more potential sources, mostly historical, in which Aesthetic writers would have found models for a sexual continence that was not only personally productive, but also formed an essential connection between the individual and society. In some cases, such as the philosophy of Plato, these sources are directly and repeatedly referred to by the writers examined in the following chapters. In others, such as the writings of the Christian Fathers, they are given because they sit behind so much of the intellectual culture on which these writers drew, producing an influence less obvious, but no less powerful. It is by combining this ethically inflected continence with certain aspects of contemporary medical discourse that Aesthetic

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 159.

writers elaborated an ideal of continence as an essential part of an aesthetic mode of life.

Intellectual Culture:

(i) Classical

The traditional history of sexual continence in the West takes a familiar path.⁸⁵ From ancient Greece and Rome, the cultures of which drew on ascetic practices from the East, it was passed via the early Christianity of the Church Fathers through the medieval to the modern Church, surviving particularly though by no means only in the Catholic Church, and thus to the relatively secular modern period. This trajectory can and should be complicated and undermined. It assumes, among other things, that the transmission of attitudes must have a linear development, rather than being constantly challenged and reinforced from other contemporaneous sources. It is also problematically treats the West in isolation, ignoring the parallel development of very similar ideals of sexual continence in Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions among others.⁸⁶ Nevertheless this model was central to nineteenth-century perceptions of this history. It formed the backbone of the intellectual context to which nineteenth-century thinkers – particularly those who, like Pater, Johnson, Lee, and (at least in later life) Moore, were steeped in scholarly tradition – would have looked when ruminating

⁸⁵ As seen, for example, in Henry Charles Lea's still authoritative *History of Sacerdotal Celibacy in the Christian Church*, 2 vols, 3rd ed. revised (New York: Macmillan, 1907; first published 1867), vol. 1, 1-16.

⁸⁶ For sexual continence in the Brahmin tradition, see Patrick Olivelle, *Ascetics and Brahmins: Ideologies and Institutions* (London: Anthem Press, 2011); Carl Olson, *Indian Asceticism: Power, Violence, and Play* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 19-21; Joseph Alter, *Gandhi's Body: Sex, Diet, and the Politics of Nationalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000). For sexual continence in the early Islamic Sufi tradition, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975), 36-38. For sexuality, asexuality, and gender in Arabo-Islamic writing, see Fedwa Malti-Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's World: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 85-110.

both upon the possible significances of sexual continence, and possible models of aesthetically-oriented living. Within this body of literature they would have found a reiteration of the idea that sexual continence could be both individually rewarding and socially constructive. Combined with a contemporary medical culture that repeatedly asserted its physiological plausibility, this idea would no doubt have been persuasive, despite the co-existence of contradictory models of bodily function.

Victorian British culture was heavily influenced by its reading of Greek and Roman texts, and this is more than usually true for the Oxford scholarly culture from which the ideal of restrained aestheticism largely emerged. Of the writers examined here, two (Pater and Johnson) were trained in classics at Oxford and maintained close links with that institution throughout their lives, while the others displayed a sustained fascination with classical culture. Some of the most central branches of Ancient Greek and Roman philosophy – Platonism, Epicureanism, Stoicism – imagined sexual continence as an ideal and creative state, and in doing so heavily influenced the development of sexual ethics in the West.⁸⁷ Philosophers in these traditions brought together ideals of deportment and conduct within upper class society, such as those ‘techniques of the self’ explored by Foucault in the second and third volumes of his *History of Sexuality*, with Eastern ascetic traditions, so as to form ideals of sexual continence with both mundane and transcendent significance.⁸⁸ Though this of course does not constitute all Greek and Roman sexuality, nevertheless for many branches of ancient philosophy, sexual continence was essential to this relationship between the individual and the community. Martha Nussbaum has depicted the Hellenistic

⁸⁷ For the influence of ancient philosophy upon Christian sexual continence in particular, see Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: University of Columbia Press, 2008; first published 1988).

⁸⁸ Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1992; this translation first published 1985; originally published in French as *L’Usage des plaisirs*, 1984), 10; and vol. 3: *The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1990; first published 1986; originally published as *Le Souci de soi*, 1984).

philosophers (after the period of Plato and Aristotle) as seeing the philosopher as ‘a compassionate physician’ who tended closely to an individual’s personal state, and the practice of philosophy as an activity that ‘can perform social and political functions, making a difference in the world by using its own distinctive methods and skills’.⁸⁹ This involved a view of the individual as in such vital and complex relationship with its community that concern with the former inevitably involves concern with the latter, and vice versa.

The main Hellenistic Schools of philosophy, particularly Epicureanism and Stoicism, were important to the intellectual element in Aesthetic culture. The philosophy of these schools served Walter Pater, in his novel *Marius the Epicurean* (1885), as a framework around which he could shape his investigation into the plausibility of an aesthetic ethics. These schools shared an ideal of tranquillity and calm, against which the passions, including sexual love, were considered a disturbing force. As Aline Rouselle has put it, ‘passion for another’s body disturbed, obsessed and obstructed reason and the freedom of the mind’, and ‘it was considered important to dissociate the mind from physical desire’.⁹⁰ Both Epicureans and Stoics held that desires (apart from bodily needs such as hunger and thirst), far from being ‘natural’ to individuals, were actually produced by one’s beliefs. These beliefs they argued were thoroughly shaped by social interactions. One’s community is therefore to a certain extent responsible for one’s desires, while one’s attitude towards those desires in turn directly affects the community, as they shape the beliefs and thus desires of others.

⁸⁹ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.

⁹⁰ Rouselle, *Porneia*, 3.

The conclusions they drew from this were, however, very different, as they disagreed whether these desires need to be moderated (Epicureans), or extirpated (Stoics).⁹¹

Perhaps most important to nineteenth-century Aestheticism, however, was the influence of Plato. Pre-Socratic Pythagorean philosophy had pulled together Orphic religious culture, Indian and Persian ascetic tradition, and the latest medical and philosophic thinking into a cultic life-model, within which sexuality was usually viewed as a weakening activity best preserved for the purpose of reproduction. This philosophy, with its parallel divisions between the worldly and unworldly, body and soul, was developed in the writing of Plato. Plato's influence on Victorian British intellectual life was wide reaching, as the range of reference in Kyriakos Demetriou's *Studies on the Reception of Plato and Greek Political Thought in Victorian Britain* (2011) goes some way towards demonstrating.⁹² John Dillon, writing of the adoption of Plato into the Christian Church, remarks that there are

two significant strands in that tradition, both stemming from Plato himself, but developing separate histories in later times: that of straightforward rejection of the body, or at least of the soul's association with it, which involves what I would identify as a negative attitude to the world; and that of the disciplining and refining of the body, to make it a worthy, or at least noninjurious receptacle of the soul, which might be seen, I think, as essentially world-affirming.⁹³

The former, world-denying Platonism is traced by Dillon to the *Phaedo*, in which Socrates counsels to 'consort with the body as little as possible, and do not commune with it, except in so far as we must, and do no infect ourselves with its nature, but

⁹¹ For further discussion of these themes in Epicurean and Stoic philosophy, see Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*.

⁹² See Kyriakos Demetriou, *Studies on the Reception of Plato and Greek Political Thought in Victorian Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011).

⁹³ John M. Dillon, 'Rejecting the Body, Refining the Body: Some Remarks on the Development of Platonist Asceticism', in Valantasis and Wimbush eds, *Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 80-87; 80.

remain pure from it'.⁹⁴ This dialogue is, Dillon writes, 'a pretty comprehensive manifesto for [...] the world-negating tradition of asceticism'.⁹⁵ But, Dillon shows, while the *Phaedo* argues for a dualistic and antagonistic body/soul division, *The Republic* introduces a tripartite division, in which rational and irrational parts of the soul must work together, and with the potentially destructive body to produce a stable, harmonious life. Instead of the defeat of troublesome elements, including sexuality, discipline of these elements and their channelling into useful avenues is recommended, so that 'the ensouled body' becomes 'an organism that gains greatly by being finely tuned'.⁹⁶ This is also where Plato turns his attention to the relationship between the individual and society, drawing close analogies between the two.

Similar concerns are found in places where Plato's emphasis is on the individual rather than society. In *The Republic* Plato has Socrates refer to potential leaders standing in the 'chariot of state',⁹⁷ but the charioteer metaphor is more fully developed with regard to the individual in the *Phaedrus*, widely considered to date from the same period. Phaedrus and Socrates debate upon the nature of love, during which Socrates argues that the soul has an innate desire for beauty. This beauty is conceived as one of Plato's Ideal Forms and in a sense is representative of the Ideal as a category. The soul, Socrates claims, was once able to see this Ideal beauty, but that ability was lost when it became embodied. But it remembers what it had seen, and strives towards it. The sight of earthly beauty reminds the soul of the Ideal Beauty that it saw before it was body-bound, inspiring it to mount to heaven in order to peer once again at the sphere of Ideal Forms. It can only do this if it disciplines the earthly nature that it takes from the body. Again the tripartite model is introduced, with the

⁹⁴ Plato, *Phaedo* [67A], quoted in 'Rejecting the Body, Refining the Body', 2002, 81.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹⁷ Quoted from unknown poetical source. Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, 2 vols (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1978-1980), vol. 2, 293 [book 8, 566D].

soul compared to a charioteer controlling two horses, one of which is easily controlled, the other less so and requiring strict training. 'For the horse of evil nature weighs the chariot down, making it heavy and pulling toward the earth the charioteer whose horse is not well trained.'⁹⁸

A similar distinction between desire for earthly and Ideal beauty is made in the *Symposium*, where again the subject of discussion is love. This time Plato, through the mouthpiece of the old woman Diotima, introduces his famous 'ladder of love', in which desire for a beautiful body inspires one to strive towards knowledge of abstract, Ideal beauty:

Beginning from obvious beauties he must for the sake of that highest beauty be ever climbing aloft, as on the rungs of a ladder, from one to two, and from two to all beautiful bodies; from personal beauty he proceeds to beautiful observances, from observances to beautiful learning, and from learning at last to that particular study which is concerned with the beautiful itself and that alone: so that in the end he comes to know the very essence of beauty.⁹⁹

It is possible to interpret this theory of love as glorifying sexual activity, particularly between a man and a young boy, as a gateway to knowledge of the Ideal. In the late nineteenth century Plato was among those sources taken up by apologists for same-sex love, such as Symonds, Carpenter, Wilde, and Raffalovich. Symonds described Plato's writings as 'the most electrical literature of the world', recording the night when he read the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium* as 'one of the most important nights of my life', while A. C. Benson, who maintained a continent ideal while recognising his own homosexual inclinations, queried in 1913, 'isn't it really rather dangerous to

⁹⁸ Plato, 'Phaedrus', in *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, trans. Harold North Fowler (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995; this translation first published 1914), 193-404; 475 [247B].

⁹⁹ Plato, 'Symposium', in *Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, trans. W. R. M. Lamb (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1991; this translation first published 1925), 73-246; 55 [211C].

let boys read Plato, if one is desirous that they should accept conventional moralities?’¹⁰⁰

But it is also possible to interpret Plato as emphasizing not the gender of the love object, but rather the strict distinction between a love originating in sense experience, and sensual love: that is, love which appreciates the beauty of a lover as indicative of Ideal beauty, as opposed to love which only appreciates physical beauty as an end in itself. It was this continent Platonic ideal – the ideal which gave rise to the term ‘Platonic love’ as signifying a love that remains sexually unconsummated – that the majority of Victorian readers chose to emphasize in Plato’s theory of love. George Ridding for example, headmaster of Winchester College and an early mentor of Lionel Johnson, argued that no sane reader would ‘make Greek genius justify Greek vice [i.e. pederasty] any more than Greek slavery’.¹⁰¹ Benjamin Jowett, in his introductions to his translations of Plato, widely used as educational texts at Oxford and elsewhere in the late nineteenth century, directs particular attention to the distinction between Ideal and sensual love. This reading, he argues, makes Plato relevant to all readers, heterosexual as much as homosexual, Victorian as well as Greek. To a great extent, Jowett’s purpose in reading Plato in this manner is to account for, and neutralize, the homosexual sentiment in Plato’s texts. Though not denying the prevalence of homosexuality – in his terms ‘secret wickedness’ – in Greek society, Jowett puts distance between the culture that produced such behaviour and his (and the reader’s) own culture. ‘In this matter’, he admits, ‘there is a great gulf fixed between Greek and Christian Ethics’, yet the reader is warned against thinking it a necessary, rather than incidental, part of even Greek culture: ‘the morals of a nation are not to be judged of wholly by its literature’. He cites many reasons for judging the

¹⁰⁰ Symonds, *Memoirs*, 99, 101; A. C. Benson, diary for 1913, quoted in Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit*, 188.

¹⁰¹ George Ridding, *Purity* (Derby: Bemrose & Sons, 1883), 6.

homosexual content of Plato's work to be insignificant next to the relevance of its content to heterosexual Victorian readers. He distinguishes between the undeniably active, sensual homosexuality prevalent in Ancient Greece, and that referred to by Plato. He insists that Plato's references to love between men and boys concern a strictly non-sexual friendship which, while always in danger of tipping into a more physical relation, nevertheless could be and for the most part was kept within 'honourable' bounds. 'The opinion of Christendom', he writes, 'has not altogether condemned passionate friendships between persons of the same sex, but has certainly not encouraged them, because though innocent in themselves in a few temperaments they are liable to degenerate into fearful evil'. Plato, he says, lived in a society whose attitudes towards women made them unfit as objects of ideal love, and so was forced to idealize passionate friendship between men. 'Seeing that, even as to personal beauty, her place was taken by young mankind instead of womankind, he tries to work out the problem of love without regard to the distinctions of nature'.¹⁰² The homosexual nature of Plato's love can therefore be dismissed as a cultural aberration, inapplicable to Victorian Britain, while its general message can be adapted for a more enlightened culture.

Jowett is emphatic concerning Plato's position on fleshly loves, whether homo- or heterosexual. 'It is observable that Plato never in the least degree excuses the depraved love of the body.' His choice of the word 'depraved', with its theological connotations of original sin, particularly connects the 'love' under discussion to the moral category of 'flesh', though this association is weak enough to allow a reader to limit understanding to particular forms of such fleshliness, such as homosexuality. Plato's goal is shown to be an ideal love, the relation of which to

¹⁰² Benjamin Jowett, *The Dialogues of Plato: Translated into English with Analyses and Introductions*, 3rd ed. revised, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1892; first published 1871) vol. 1, 537, 415, 537, 536, 529, 406.

fleshly love is comparable, according to Jowett, to the distinction between that of a Christian heterosexual couple who love for each other's bodies, and that of the couple who love each other in and through their respective loves of God. 'The opposition between these two kinds of love may be compared to the opposition between the flesh and the spirit in the Epistles of St. Paul'. Going even further, he suggests that the homosexual content of Plato's dialogues can be read as artistry and illustration, rather than taken literally:

It is too often forgotten that the whole of the second discourse of Socrates is only an allegory, or figure of speech. For this reason, it is unnecessary to enquire whether the love of which Plato speaks is the love of men or of women. It is really a general idea which includes both, and in which the sensual element, though not wholly eradicated, is reduced to order and measure.¹⁰³

Though evidently overstretching in his efforts to account for homosexual desire in Plato's dialogues, Jowett's reading of Plato as advocating a continent sexuality regardless of the gender of potential objects is not without basis.

Further, Jowett finds that, though his promotion of such Platonic continence has allowed him to steer clear of the Scylla of homosexuality, yet he must contend also with a powerful Charybdis. As an unmarried college fellow, he finds himself having to reconcile this position with a Protestant belief in the holiness of marriage and an anti-Catholic suspicion of celibacy. In doing so, he interprets Plato in a manner that would – somewhat ironically, given their different valuations of continence – become central to Walter Pater's aesthetic reading of Plato in his *Plato and Platonism* (1893). Plato, Jowett claims, was so caught up in his desire for abstract ideals that he failed to make a proper distinction between the sensory and the sensual, between

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 415.

innocent and immoral sense experience. ‘In attempting to regain this “saving” knowledge of the ideas, the sense was found to be as great an enemy as the desires; and hence two things which to us seem quite distinct’, that is, sensuousness and sensuality, ‘are inextricably blended in the representation of Plato’. As with Jowett’s reading of Platonic homosexuality, his anxiety upon this point produces rhetorical strain as he attempts to build a strong argument upon shifting ground. Plato, he argues, never intended this harsh anti-sensory doctrine to apply to all men. ‘In the end something is conceded to the desires, after they have been finally humbled and overpowered.’ That something for Jowett is, of course, marriage rather than a sexual relationship with a boy, though the latter is undoubtedly what Plato refers to in the *Symposium*. But Jowett cannot avoid the seemingly secondary nature of this solution in Plato’s eyes. ‘And yet the way of philosophy’, he continues, ‘or perfect love of the unseen, is total abstinence from bodily delights. “But all men cannot receive this saying”’.¹⁰⁴ In quoting Matthew 19:11 (‘But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given’) Jowett Christianizes Plato, turning the love of philosophy to a love of God; but only, as he must have known, by quoting a text commonly used by Catholics and (as we will see below) Oxford Tractarians to justify celibacy.

This strategy implied a model of ‘the few and the many’, dear to John Henry Newman (cf. 94), and which would become important, via Matthew Arnold, to Walter Pater too, and to many of his followers. Jowett attempts to bring this distinction between sensuous love and the love of philosophy back towards marriage, at least for the many. During his analogy between Plato’s theory of love and Christian matrimony, he writes, ‘when they have attained to this exalted state, let them marry

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 412, 411.

(something too may be conceded to the animal nature of man): or live together in holy and innocent friendship'. He also tries to make some measure of active sexuality necessary to Plato, who, he says:

is conscious that the highest and noblest things in the world are not easily severed from the sensual desires, or may even be regarded as a spiritualized form of them. We may observe that Socrates himself is not represented as originally unimpassioned, but as one who has overcome his passions; the secret of his power over others partly lies in his passionate but self-controlled nature.¹⁰⁵

This conception of Socrates as one whose control of his passionate nature produces a heightened power was common in Victorian England. A popular 'advice for young men' text entitled *Chastity: Physical, Intellectual, and Moral Advantages* (1894) written by the American pseudo-medical writer M. L. Holbrook but widely circulated in England, cites 'A Lesson From Socrates' in illustration of 'The Great Advantages of Chastity': 'Socrates, with his passional nature quite as strong as any sensualist, became one of the greatest men of antiquity, simply because he used his tremendous bodily resources for other ends'.¹⁰⁶ But Jowett is still uncomfortable with the difficulty of mapping Plato onto a Protestant marriage imperative. He returns again to the 'few and the many' argument more recognizable to readers of Newman. In the context of the undesirability of a too-exclusive love of an intellectual ideal to the detriment of marriage, he writes:

there is a probability that there may be some few – perhaps one or two in a whole generation – in whom the light of truth may not lack the warmth of desire. And if there be such natures, no one will be disposed to deny that "from them flow most of the benefits of individuals and states;" and even from

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 408, 525.

¹⁰⁶ M. L. Holbrook, *Chastity: Its Physical, Moral, and Intellectual Advantages* (London: L. N. Fowler & Co., 1894), 55.

imperfect combinations of the two elements in teachers or statesmen great good may often arise.¹⁰⁷

Jowett makes the argument that Platonic continence is not incompatible with social duty, and might even be conducive to it: for a few. This form of argument would become important to Aesthetic writers eager to integrate sexual continence into a personally and socially responsible aesthetic mode of life.

It is not hard to see how a Victorian reader might find an agreement between the more obviously productive continence of Plato, and that of wider Hellenistic philosophy, however much these philosophies may otherwise disagree. This is exactly what can be seen to happen in *Marius the Epicurean*, and to some extent in *Plato and Platonism* where, as we will see in the following chapter, Plato is read via Epicurus particularly, and thus recast as both pleasure seeking and sexually continent. It is also possible to find in Hellenistic philosophy an association of continence with mental discipline as well as with social good, which would carry through to the Victorian period.

Intellectual Culture:

(ii) Christian

The influence of ancient philosophical ideas upon Victorian culture was a double inheritance, operating directly through reading of ancient texts, and indirectly by virtue of the influence such ideas had had upon Christian culture. In the early centuries AD, writers who elaborated a Christian doctrine that would be both a communal and individual guide to daily life drew upon non-Christian texts. Their

¹⁰⁷ Jowett, *Dialogues of Plato*, 515, 533.

writings would in turn provide an important source for Victorians attempting to do the same, whether within a religious or secular context. The Church Fathers were, for example, central to the Catholic revival in Britain throughout the nineteenth century. For those seeking reform within the Church of England at the beginning of the century, the Fathers provided models of a ‘purer’ Christianity, offering the potential for revolutionary change while remaining true to ecclesiastically conservative values of tradition and continuity. The *Library of the Fathers*, edited by prominent members of the Tractarian Movement, made around 50 works available in English translation from 1838 to 1881, reflecting the deep influence that the Patristic texts had on Victorian religious thought, and through that to secular culture.

The Church Fathers had looked to non-Christian Greek and Roman literature, both philosophical and medical, for examples of how to work sexual renunciation into a plausible scheme of ethics. But the unusual emphasis and value that they gave to continence in the first place stemmed from the writings of St Paul. Jesus himself was represented by the Gospel writers as continent; but his was, as Peter Brown points out, the ‘unremarkable adjunct of his prophet’s calling’, recognizable as part of a Jewish tradition in which celibacy marked a special spiritual state, but was not recommended for all.¹⁰⁸ With Paul, however, sexuality came to carry a weight of privileged, symbolic meaning within the Church that it had rarely had outside of it, either in the thought of pagan philosophers or of Jewish sages, but which it has retained up to the present day. In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul unambiguously advocates a model of unequal sexual capacity, in which some people are physically more capable of continence than others. ‘It is good for a man not to touch a woman’ he says, before

¹⁰⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 48, 52, 41. For more on early Jewish asceticism, see Naomi Koltun-Fromm, *Hermeneutics of Holiness: Ancient Jewish and Christian Notions of Sexuality and Religious Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Daniel Boyarin, *Carnal Israel: Reading Sex in Talmudic Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

continuing, 'But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn' (1 Corinthians 7:1, 7:9). Paul's intended tone here was, as Brown points out, almost certainly conciliatory. As early Christianity developed, it distinguished itself from pagan and Jewish religions through an emphasis on sexual continence, though this took various forms.¹⁰⁹ 'Above the solid conglomerate of ancient, Jewish notions', writes Brown, 'there now rose the peak of total chastity'. Early Christian writers such as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen drew on both pagan philosophical and medical writing to create ideals of communities formed around sexual continence. Tertullian and Clement developed systems of 'spirit-filled gerontocracy', communities led by once sexually active, but now continent old men, while Origen focused upon the individual's careful discipline and training of the senses to perceive God, 'the hesitant, fragile growth of a spiritual sense of preternatural sharpness' in order to produce 'a refined, almost an aesthetic, spiritual sensibility'.¹¹⁰

Resonances of these Christian modes of continence can be felt in much Victorian literature, but nowhere more strongly than in the writings of the Tractarian Movement, and through that, in the Aestheticism of the latter end of the century, especially that of Pater and Johnson. It is difficult to make sense of the currency of productive continence in the nineteenth century without acknowledging the great influence, both religious and secular, of Anglo-Catholicism, through which the otherwise relatively unfashionable Catholic notion of priestly celibacy found a wide audience in Victorian Britain. The Oxford Movement, or Tractarianism, emerged in the 1830s. Its influence on Aestheticism in particular has long been widely acknowledged, with David DeLaura going so far as to say that 'the substance of

¹⁰⁹ Groups that practised a religious form of sexual promiscuity did exist, but were in the minority. The writing of their history is made more difficult by the habit of Christian groups to accuse each other of sexual misbehaviour: by 200 A. D., every extant group had had such accusations made against them by others. See *ibid.*, 140.

¹¹⁰ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 48, 60, 173.

dogmatic Christianity was transformed, within one or two generations, into the fabric of Aestheticism'.¹¹¹ Tractarianism was, as Owen Chadwick observes, 'more a movement of the heart than of the head';¹¹² there were, of course, certain doctrinal constants, as well as many focused doctrinal debates, but what really made Newman, Keble, Pusey, Faber and others the founders of a movement was a shared mode of feeling, a renewed attention to tradition and ritual and to an attitude of reverence and awe in religious observance. These spread, as the century progressed, far beyond the Movement's original geographical and even doctrinal boundaries.

Anglo-Catholicism was itself highly influenced by artistic culture. 'It is', remarks Hilary Fraser, 'a critical commonplace that the Oxford Movement was, in some important respects, a late theological flowering of Romanticism'.¹¹³ Many of its originators were highly successful poets, with Keble's *The Christian Year* (1827), 'the outward sign of the new sensibility in the piety of high churchmen', selling over 10,000 copies a year for at least 50 years, surpassing the sales of the then Poet Laureate William Wordsworth.¹¹⁴ 'Aesthetic sensibility defined the special character of the Victorian Anglo-Catholic revival', and can be found at every level of Tractarian debate.¹¹⁵ This religious appropriation of Romantic sensibility made it easy for Romanticism's late nineteenth-century literary inheritors, including those associated with Pre-Raphaelitism and the Aesthetic Movement, to appropriate Tractarian ideas and modes in turn. Among these was an ideal of austere beauty in

¹¹¹ David J. DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), xi; see also Hilary Fraser, *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

¹¹² Owen Chadwick ed., *The Mind of the Oxford Movement* (London: Adam Charles Black, 1960), 11.

¹¹³ Fraser, *Beauty and Belief*, 11. See also Stephen Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion: The Tradition of Coleridge and Wordsworth in the Victorian Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), and David Goslee, *Romanticism and the Anglican Newman* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1996).

¹¹⁴ Chadwick, *The Mind of the Oxford Movement*, 27; Stephen Prickett, 'Tractarian Poetry', in Richard Cronin et al. eds, *A Companion to Victorian Poetry* (Malden: Blackwell, 2002), 279-90; 279.

¹¹⁵ Fraser, *Beauty and Belief*, 2.

everyday life that could include, among other behaviours, sexual continence. Aesthetic writers adopted this ideal in varying degrees. To some, such as Le Gallienne, Symons, and Wilde, it was revered as one beautiful attitude among many, but did not hold an exclusive place in their representations of sexuality. For others, particularly Pater, the values that Tractarians attached to continence, as well as their conception of it as a productive state, significantly influenced the manner in which sexuality was incorporated into their ethical thinking.

Like Aestheticism, and indeed like English Catholicism, Tractarianism was criticized as both overly selfish and overly sensual. This was particularly true of those Tractarians who valued sexual continence highly, and advocated priestly celibacy. As Vance has observed, ‘it was a common objection that mortification of the flesh and other religious observances were often ultimately selfish will-worship’, while Tractarian celibacy was read in the anti-Catholic tradition as hypocritical, the congregations of celibate priests represented as ‘the deluded dupes of men who lusted for sex, money, and power’.¹¹⁶ Like Aestheticism, Anglo-Catholicism was commonly perceived as both a dangerous deviation from ideal manliness, and a sexual perversion characterized alternately as hetero- and homosexual. But the Tractarian avocation of celibacy should not be read entirely through anti-Catholic strategies, what Dominic Janes has called ‘the Protestant sexualisation of rival forms of religious expression’.¹¹⁷ To do so risks obscuring a discrete discourse within which Tractarians associated distinct values with celibacy. Tractarian discussion of celibacy did not explicitly worry about seminal loss, or express the attendant idea of the positive effects of seminal retention. But it did consistently follow the historical Christian

¹¹⁶ D. G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 2; Vance, *The Sinews of the Spirit*, 39.

¹¹⁷ Dominic Janes, ‘When “Perverts” Were Religious: The Protestant Sexualization of Asceticism in Nineteenth-Century Britain, India and Ireland’, *Cultural and Social History*, 11:3 (2014), 425-39; 426.

tradition of representing continence as a productive state that has positive value both for the continent individual and the society of which he or she forms a part. In doing so it frequently employed language reminiscent of that associated with seminal retention. The many resonances between the manner in which continence is described and utilized by Aestheticism and Tractarianism suggests direct influence, such as that identified by David DeLaura between Newman and Pater.¹¹⁸ But they also imply a shared common culture in which productive continence was a plausible product of many sexual discourses.

R. W. Church in 1891 described the Tractarian celibate ideal as ‘in the highest degree a religious and romantic one’. ‘To shrink from it’, he writes, ‘was a mark of want of strength or intelligence, of an unmanly preference for English home life, of insensibility to the generous devotion and purity of the saints’.¹¹⁹ Where Tractarian celibacy has recently attracted critical attention, it has largely been treated as a Victorian cover, conscious or unconscious, for homosexuality. The first to make such an argument was Geoffrey Faber, who in his 1933 account of the main figures of the Oxford Movement proposed repressed homosexuality as the psychological origin for the continence of Richard Hurrell Froude and Newman in particular. ‘Psychology’, he wrote, ‘had not yet taught men to look for the roots of spiritual ideals in their animal nature’, but ‘psychology lies between us and them. We cannot help looking for those animal roots’.¹²⁰ Faber assumes sexuality to be, at least to a certain extent, historically constant, to be reconstructable by an enlightened present. More recent interpretations of Tractarian continence as essentially homosexual, though not necessarily

¹¹⁸ DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, 303-46.

¹¹⁹ R. W. Church, *The Oxford Movement: Twelve Years, 1833-1845* (London: Macmillan, 1891), 370.

¹²⁰ Geoffrey Faber, *Oxford Apostles: A Character Study of the Oxford Movement* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974; first published 1933), 218.

consciously so or thought about in that manner at the time, have often reproduced this approach.¹²¹

For many of the Movement's proponents, continence figured as the consequence of much that they valued: a general attitude of awe and reverence towards the divine, including the divine in the world; a practice of discipline and restraint in everyday life; and a sense of spiritual intensity. This was especially true of Newman and those who were close to him. Moreover, it is in just this nexus of values that it is possible to find strong echoes of that particular branch of 'austere' Aestheticism that is the focus of this thesis. Tractarian continence was closely associated with the doctrine of reserve, a crucial element in the call for a return to the discipline of the Primitive Church. In its simplest form, reserve is the principle that God is hidden: the incapability of our minds fully to comprehend the divine is caused by our finite nature, and is thus an inevitable result of our fallen state. In practice, 'reserve' referred both to this principle, and to a range of principles, practices, and beliefs which it implied or generated. Primarily it led to special emphasis upon the principle of gradual revelation, the idea that the divine is revealed to us slowly, in proportion to our capacity to receive such apprehension or knowledge. This conception of revelation informed much of the Tractarian approach to divinity; it cautioned awe and reverence in the treatment of sacred things, inspired attention to ritual in church services and prayer, and recommended gradual communication of religious knowledge to those without it, according to their relative capacity to receive it, rather than wholesale preaching of church doctrine. Above all, it imposed the close consideration of one's own capacity to receive divine knowledge, and improvement of that state. In this way, doctrinal 'reserve' made contact with more generic

¹²¹ See, for example, Frederick Roden, *Same-Sex Desire in Victorian Religious Culture* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

connotations of the word, indicating a manner towards others and towards the world.¹²² Duc Dau and Kirstie Blair have both explored the manner in which this ‘reserve’, for Dau expanded to include all ‘deferral, concealment, self-containment, discipline, the veil, and the lack of touch’, can be used to reveal the extent to which Tractarians, at least in their poetry, tied continence to their foundational religious beliefs.¹²³

Tractarian continence was in some ways rather alien from that of Aestheticism, particularly in its close association with asceticism and penance. Ultimately, Aesthetic emphasis upon sense experience and beauty is difficult to reconcile with a Christian ascetic denial of worldly good, however much it may occasionally admire ascetic figures such as St Francis or Thomas à Kempis. But there was another side to Tractarian continence, especially as expressed by Newman, in which the personal and social benefits of continence were stressed beyond their doctrinal basis. Tractarian reserve saw the convergence of Christian attention to the ethics of lifestyle, to the details of everyday behaviour, with a high valuation of both discipline and beauty. This furnished some Aesthetic writers – Pater, Johnson, and Lee in particular – with an example of an aesthetically-inclined ethics that engaged with many ideas dear to them, including a conception of sexual continence that was both individually productive and socially useful.

Newman frequently described his own continence as a matter of personal feeling, preceding his intellectual investigation of the subject. He claimed in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* to have been convinced from the age of 15 that he would not

¹²² James Eli Adams has discussed the importance of the doctrine of reserve to Newman’s ethical thinking, but does not connect this with celibacy specifically. See *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 83-106.

¹²³ Duc Dau, ‘Perfect Chastity: Celibacy and Virgin Marriage in Tractarian Poetry’, *Victorian Poetry*, 44:1 (2006), 77-92, 78; Kirstie Blair, ‘Breaking Loose: Frederick Faber and the Failure of Reserve’, *Victorian Poetry*, 44:1 (Spring, 2006), 25-41.

marry, anticipating therefore even his movement from his family's Evangelicalism to Anglicanism. In his comments upon clerical celibacy in particular, at least before his conversion to Roman Catholicism, he was careful always to draw a line between personal conviction and church doctrine. 'I consider it [...] as a more holy state', he wrote to Faber, 'but could not urge this strongly on another, this view being so much a matter of feeling'. (Earlier he had written to a correspondent: 'for years I have made up my *mind* to remain in single blessedness — but whether my *heart* be equally made up, time alone can tell'. The emphasis was thus placed variously on intellectual choice and feeling.)¹²⁴ This individualist continence, more life-mode than dogma, that closely echoes the aesthetic sexual continence that appears later in the century. Such continence was frequently associated with the necessity for discipline (definable both as rigour and ritual) in religious life that falls just short of penitential asceticism. This discipline could feature as both end and means, as the process by which an ideal mode of life was achieved, and the visible evidence of that achievement.

The conception of a spiritual few whose journey toward God will be swifter than the many was dear to many Tractarians, particularly Newman, who evidently saw such a few as ideally continent. 'The celibate', he wrote to Ryder, 'is a high state of life, to which the multitude of men cannot aspire — I do not say, that they who adopt it are necessarily better than others, though the noblest ἦθος [ethos] is situated in that state'.¹²⁵ The idea that continence was suited only to a few drew on 1 Corinthians 7:9, as well as on Matthew 19:12, in which Jesus says to his disciples: 'For there are some eunuchs that were so born from their mother's womb: and there are some eunuchs, which were made eunuchs of men: and there be eunuchs which

¹²⁴ Letter to F. W. Faber, 27 October 1840, in *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol. 7, ed. Gerard Tracey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 421-22, 422; letter to Simon Lloyd Pope, 9 April 1832, in *ibid.*, vol. 3, eds Ian Ker and Thomas Gornall, S.J. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 42-43, 43. Italics are the author's.

¹²⁵ Letter from Newman to George Ryder, 22-23 July 1832, in *ibid.*, 70.

have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake. He that is able to receive it, let him receive it'. The preceding verse links this directly to the scriptural argument for reserve in communication of religious knowledge: 'But he said unto them, All men cannot receive this saying, save they to whom it is given'. Such elitist continence was not limited to Newman; many Tractarians write of it as a higher state to which they fear they are not called. Faber in 1840 writes:

I honour the celibate so highly, and regard it so eminently the fittest way of life for a priest, that if Christ would graciously enable me to learn to live alone, I should prefer much, even with great selfdenials [sic], to live a virgin life, and to die a virgin, as God has kept me so hitherto. But I am under no vow, and distrust myself too much to make one.

He also wonders whether there is not a '*moral* continence, [...] the power of living alone so far as visible things to lean on are concerned; but I fear I have it not'.¹²⁶ Faber seems to recognise here that continence is not, for Newman among others, simply a physical state, but rather a temperament or mode of being in its own right.

The Tractarian celibate, especially the celibate priest, also borrowed the Catholic conception of celibacy's connection with social usefulness and disinterest. In 1832 Newman wrote to Henry Wilberforce, 'You mistake me, if you think I consider clergymen, as such, should not marry, I only think there should be among the clergy enough unmarried, to give a character of strength to the whole — and that therefore, every one should ask himself whether he is called to the celibate'.¹²⁷ This argument for the special communal usefulness and power of the celibate also comes out of and feeds into a secular nineteenth-century humanistic discourse of the few among the

¹²⁶ Letter from Faber to J. B. Morris, 21 October 1840, in John Edward Bowden, *The Life and Letters of Frederick William Faber D. D.* (London: Thomas Richardson and Son, 1869), 79-80, 79; letter from Faber to Newman, 24 October 1840, in *The Letters and Diaries of John Henry Newman*, vol. 7, 419-20, 419. Italics are the author's.

¹²⁷ Letter from Newman to Henry Wilberforce, February 26 1832, *ibid.*, vol. 3, 22-24; 23.

many. As David DeLaura notes, though ‘the idea of a “clerisy” or an intellectual elite was a commonplace in nineteenth-century England’, it is particularly evident in the intellectual line that leads from German Romanticism through Newman and Arnold to Pater. One might well add, as DeLaura suggests, such inheritors of Paterian Aestheticism as Lionel Johnson and Oscar Wilde; and it would be possible to continue the list with Vernon Lee, and (sometimes) George Moore.¹²⁸ DeLaura shows the great influence of Newman’s sermon on the text ‘Many Called, Few Chosen’, and especially the words ‘the few can never mean the many’, on Arnold’s conception of a society, bringing out of Newman’s words ‘the theory of a spiritual and intellectual elite who are alone the privileged bearers of truth’. Pater, he argues, read Newman in conjunction with Arnold.¹²⁹ But while this is, no doubt, in part true, Pater does get something from Newman’s idea of ‘the few’ that Arnold does not. With Pater, and subsequently with those of the Aesthetic Movement who most closely followed this line of his thinking, Newman’s original close association of ‘the few’ with ‘the celibate’, a group who exercised both an individual discipline and communal usefulness, is restored. Newman’s useful, strong continence also occasionally carried, as Frank Turner has pointed out, a misogynistic tone, as continence is figured as a masculine state threatened by close relation with women.¹³⁰ ‘The Church wants expeditos milites’, he writes, ‘not a whole camp of women at its heels, forbye brats’.¹³¹ Aesthetic writers, as we will see, also occasionally perpetuated this masculine prejudice.

¹²⁸ DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, 311, x. For more on the notion of an intellectual ‘clerisy’ in early and mid-Victorian prose writing, see Ben Knights, *The Idea of the Clerisy in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).

¹²⁹ DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, 339-44; John Henry Newman, ‘Many Called, Few Chosen’, in *Parochial and Plain Sermons*, 8 vols (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1907; first published 1868), vol. 5, 254-68; 268.

¹³⁰ Turner, *John Henry Newman*, 426.

¹³¹ Letter from Newman to Simon Lloyd Pope, 9 April 1832, 43.

Late nineteenth-century Aestheticism was the product of a culture permeated with the idea that sexual continence could form part of an individual cultivation of intense personal experience, while also enabling that individual to turn that cultivation into communal usefulness. The aesthete who faced charges of selfishness and sensuality could find in this already well-worked discourse a way in which to explore new ways of being while never stepping irreversibly outside socially acceptable sexual modes. Whether or not these writers actually practised sexual continence, and whatever the gender of the potential objects of their sexual desires, it remains the case that when writing about or representing sexuality they frequently returned to a discourse of productive sexual continence the roots of which can be found to stretch back through historical Christianity to the ancient pagan world, as well as through a significant portion of Victorian and earlier representations of bodily function. In the chapters that follow, I have outlined this perhaps less familiar Aestheticism in the work of three writers, connected by their manner of elaborating the idea of the aesthetic life: Walter Pater, Lionel Johnson, and Vernon Lee. A fourth chapter presents, in contrast, a case in which this sexual discourse is combined with other, more positively sensual discourses of the period: George Moore.

Chapter Two

‘A Passionate Coldness’: Walter Pater

Pater's most influential texts, including *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) and *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas* (1885), can be read as espousing ultimately, though by no means without qualification, a sexually continent life as appropriate to those of an aesthetic temperament. The logic of his 'reserve' is strongly reminiscent of a nineteenth-century medical model of productive sexual continence, in which 'passion' is transformed and intensified through conservation. At the same time, Pater may be read as proposing that this continent mechanism be interpreted as a mode of being, involving the cultivation of a network of moral values, in which active sexuality is associated with the temporal, the particular, and the selfish, and continent sexuality with the universal, general, and communal. This association of sexual continence with what was often conceptualized as 'the general life' allowed Pater, according to this reading, to evolve an ideal mode of life that satisfied the aesthete's need, not only for intense personal sensation, but also for a specific type of sensation predicated on a balanced, temperate state of being termed by Pater 'health'; and at the same time combated the charge of selfish individualism commonly brought against Aesthetic writing by allowing the aesthete access to 'love', imagined broadly by Pater as a sense of communal life and represented by him as a universal human need. Sexual continence, then, can be identified as a keystone in Pater's thinking about the aesthetic life.

Reading Pater in this way involves the assumption that his various pronouncements on the aesthetic life form a coherent, if frequently modified and occasionally contradicted, theory or ideal. This is not without its problems. Pater has

been compared to postmodern writers in his sceptical refusal to acknowledge hegemonic truth. It has been frequently argued, most eloquently perhaps by Anthony Ward and, more recently, Jonathan Loesberg and Kate Hext, that the ultimately unsatisfying nature of Pater's philosophical speculations is also the result of a relativist epistemology. 'It is as though', writes Ward, 'the "perpetual flux" had penetrated into his vocabulary', while Loesberg states that Pater's 'skeptical theories of perception and aesthetics, explicitly informed as they are by various and contradictory philosophies, foreshadow the deconstructive interest in the corrosive links between philosophy and aesthetic form'.¹ Hext concedes that, if Pater's thought is 'shifting, apparently contradictory and, in places, tinged in purple' then 'this is, in part, the point'.²

It is true that, as early biographer Ferris Greenslet put it, 'the very Genius of Qualification followed [Pater] through all his thinking'. But if, as Greenslet continues, 'all too often in his writing, instead of selecting from among the possible qualifications of his idea, he gives them all', still Pater's work can be considered to be anchored in certain assumed values, revealed more in marked preferences than definite moral pronouncements. And he was certainly read in this way by many of his original readers: reviews, criticism, and memoirs do not hesitate to comment on his 'philosophy of life'.³ These preferences, or at least the terms in which they are couched, change slightly from work to work. It is in these often subtle, yet persistent weightings and leanings, as much as in any overt statement, that it is possible to read Pater as advocating sexual continence for the aesthete. This does not, of course,

¹ Anthony Ward, *Walter Pater: The Idea in Nature* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1966), 37; Jonathan Loesberg, *Aestheticism and Deconstruction: Pater, Derrida, and De Man* (Princeton: University of Princeton Press, 1991), 3.

² Kate Hext, *Walter Pater: Individualism and Aesthetic Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 6.

³ Ferris Greenslet, *Walter Pater* (New York: McClure, Phillips & Co., 1903), 96, 96-97, 84.

suggest that it is possible or desirable to work Pater up into any universalizing system. True always to his Genius of Qualification, such a reading must admit that there are points at which almost any idea will seem difficult to reconcile with values that Pater otherwise extols. Difficult, yet not, in the case of aesthetic sexual continence, impossible, as the final section of this chapter argues.

It is no longer necessary to justify reading Pater's work in the context of sexuality. The 1990s saw a revival of interest in 'Pater Studies', in which many critics took their cue from what William Shuter has called the 'outing' of Pater, and the subsequent 'discovery' of sexual, particularly homosexual, themes throughout his work.⁴ The resulting body of criticism has solidified the sense that a connection may be drawn between Pater's 'erotic' aesthetics and his ethics, combining in what Richard Dellamora has called his 'sexual-aesthetic ideal of culture'.⁵ The majority of this work has emphasized Pater's insistence on the importance of sensuous, embodied experience. This has often involved what 'surface' readers would call 'suspicious' reading, in which the true meaning of a text is assumed to be hidden or veiled, requiring resurrection and interpretation. References to sense and body have been interrogated for their erotic potential, while words such as 'sensuous' have been read as directly equivalent to 'sensual' or 'erotic', 'pleasure' to 'sexual pleasure', 'body' as the sexual body and so on. Such readings obscure the nineteenth-century tradition in

⁴ William F. Shuter, 'The "Outing" of Walter Pater', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 48:4 (March, 1994), 480-506. This article is in response to Laurel Brake, 'Judas and the Widow: Thomas Wright and A. C. Benson as Biographers of Walter Pater: The Widow', *Prose Studies: History, Theory and Criticism*, 4:1 (1981), 39-54, and Billie Andrew Inman, 'Estrangement and Connection: Walter Pater, Benjamin Jowett, and William M. Harginge', in *Pater in the 1990s*, eds Laurel Brake and Ian Small (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1991), 1-20.

⁵ Richard Dellamora, *Masculine Desire: The Sexual Politics of Victorian Aestheticism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 102. See also Brake, 'Judas and the Widow', and 'Print and Gender: The Publishing Career of Walter Pater, 1866-95', in *Print in Transition, 1850-1910: Studies in Media and Book History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 183-282; Inman, 'Estrangement and Connection'; Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 173-202.

which Pater was read as advocating, not what Dellamora calls an ‘erotophobic’ attitude, but rather a sexual continence coherent with nineteenth-century sexual discourse.⁶

That is not to say that the potential for continent readings of Pater’s work has been entirely ignored. Linda Dowling, while evaluating Pater’s position in the homosocial-homoerotic continuum that she traces in nineteenth-century Oxford Platonism, has been careful to locate him, with many other Oxford men of the time, at what she calls the ‘non-genital’ end of the scale, preferring ‘a mode of spiritual and emotional attachment that was, at some ultimate level, innocent or asexual’.⁷ Both Gerald Monsman and Adam Lee have extended this de-sexualization of Pater in their discussions of his idealized, non-actively sexual ‘Platonic Eros’.⁸ Shuter argues that Pater frequently returned to ‘a condition not of sterility or impotence but of reserved potency’, emphasizing ‘its cultural and artistic fertility’.⁹ Hext has also drawn attention to Pater’s emphasis on ‘reserve’ in his thinking about bodily sensation, describing it as his answer to an otherwise irresolvable tension between the liberating potential of sensuous experience, and its destructive possibilities. ‘Restrained expression’, she writes, ‘is *essential* to Paterian desire’.¹⁰ This is an element of Pater’s work to which many contemporary readers paid great attention.

Herbert Sussman has foregrounded the specifically medical context that can be given to Pater’s sexual reserve. Sussman places Pater at the end of his study of the manner in which early-nineteenth-century writers and artists related the proper

⁶ Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 104.

⁷ Linda Dowling, ‘Ruskin’s Pied Beauty and the Constitution of a “Homosexual Code”’, *The Victorian Newsletter*, 75 (Spring, 1989), 4; Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 115.

⁸ Gerald Monsman, ‘The Platonic Eros of Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde: “Love’s Reflected Image” in the 1890s’, *ELT*, 45:1 (2002), 26-45; Adam Lee, ‘Platonic Communion in Pater’s “Unfinished Romance”’, *The Pater Newsletter*, 63 (Fall, 2012), 25-44.

⁹ Shuter, ‘The “Outing” of Walter Pater’, 502.

¹⁰ Hext, *Walter Pater*, 117.

regulation of male sexuality to the production of art. This chapter builds upon Sussman's work in placing Pater at the beginning, rather than the end, of a tentative genealogy, though it will depart from his claims that Pater's 'aesthetic regimen of mind' pushes beyond regulation to a productive retention because his 'desire takes the form of a forbidden homoeroticism'.¹¹ Parts of Pater's writing can certainly be read as homoerotic, and these parts are generally inscribed within discourses – romantic friendship, Hellenism, and religious reserve – that can also be found in writing by men who openly professed sexual desire for other men, such as Oscar Wilde, John Addington Symonds and Edward Carpenter. It is undeniable also that such men often consciously borrowed such discourses from Pater in their effort to articulate homosexual desire. Yet readers of all sexual orientations, including the heterosexual, found Pater useful when theorizing their sexual lives, whether active or continent. In his use of such discourses Pater can be read as acknowledging the potential homoeroticism of his material, but instead turning to the more socially acceptable idea of Aesthetic sexual continence, with which these same discourses were also commonly associated. Within this alternative sexual mode, the specific object of Pater's sensuousness is less important than the extent to which that sensuousness can be disassociated from sensuality, from active sexuality, and associated instead with a retentive sexual practice. It is possible to read Pater's emphasis on pleasurable sensation in *The Renaissance* as differing significantly from sexual pleasure, keeping sensuous pleasure crucially within the bounds beyond which it becomes sensual. This is, I argue, how a great many of Pater's nineteenth-century readers approached his writing, and constitutes a different and arguably more widespread legacy than that found in the work of Wilde and Symonds.

¹¹ Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*, 174.

I have so far taken for granted the fact that Pater, though primarily a critic, was also throughout his writing career concerned with right and wrong ways of ordering one's life. Such a point is not uncontroversial: he is most often read as deliberately diverging from a mid-Victorian criticism more overtly motivated by recognizable moral, specifically Christian, values. John Ruskin, for example, put great emphasis on the necessity for a critic to be able to identify the moral quality (*theoria*) of an artwork, an ability implicitly reliant on the moral sensibility of the critic himself. Pater, in initially locating the test of criticism in subjective sensation instead of in congruity with objective moral laws, realigned this relationship between the 'good' and aesthetic experience. Whereas Ruskin had found moral truth, in most cases, to be a necessary quality of good art, Pater seemed to identify in good art a pattern for moral truth, as he theorized art's development as rising from basic humane instincts and often described good art and orderly living in a similar idiom. Yet he retained from Ruskin, and, as Hext has described, the tradition of German Romantic and Idealist thought, the sense of continuity between effective criticism and living a good life, as well as of a certain rigour or discipline needed to attain both.¹² It is undeniably the writing in which Pater most insistently addresses this continuity – the 'Conclusion' to *The Renaissance* and *Marius the Epicurean* – that has had the most profound influence on generations of readers, especially artists and critics.

Pater does not give absolute rules by which all people must live, referable to an authority external to the individual. Attention should, he claims, be given more to the 'manner' in which one lives than to particular actions, what he calls, in his essay on Wordsworth, '*being* as distinct from *doing*'.¹³ The test for this 'being' is to be

¹² Hext, *Walter Pater*, *passim*.

¹³ Walter Pater, 'Wordsworth' (first published 1874), in *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1889), 61. All further references to *Appreciations* will be to this edition and given in the text.

found in the individual, with different modes of life being suitable to different temperaments: as Hext puts it, ‘the individual, and not art, is at the very heart of [Pater’s] aestheticism’.¹⁴ The ways in which Pater deploys an ideal of sexual continence both legitimizes this aesthetic individualism, and transcends it, finding in an association with communal breadth a solution to the charges of solipsism so often brought against it. It is difficult, however, to read Pater as an absolute moral relativist, though he was unwilling to universalize a moral practice. Though Pater seems to admit that the same rules of living may not apply for everyone, he certainly does assume certain universally desirable qualities. I therefore argue that Pater can be seen to make some attempt to form a loose ethic that can be applied universally. Most of his ethical writing does, however, deal primarily with what can be called ‘the aesthetic life’, the life most fitted to one who has an aesthetic or artistic temperament, whether or not they produce works of art. In making this distinction between an aesthetic ethic, and the universal ethic of which it is a part or manifestation, I depart from the account of Pater’s ethics recently offered by Hext, in which the contradictions inherent in this aesthetic ethic are used to criticize Pater’s ethical thinking as a whole.¹⁵

In interrogating the structure of Pater’s practical philosophy or philosophies, I use Foucault’s conceptual model of the ‘ethic’ or ‘technology of the self’, defined as the means by which the self relates to itself, constructs itself as an ‘ethical subject’.¹⁶ Foucault’s model is appropriate for Pater in a way that it is not quite for Johnson, Lee and Moore, because Pater’s sense of sociability and community stays for the most part within the confines of personal *ethic* even when considering the necessity of

¹⁴ Hext, *Walter Pater*, 1.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*, particularly 165-81.

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 2: *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin Books, 1992; this translation first published 1985; originally published in French as *L’Usage des plaisirs*, 1984), 25-32.

community to one's happiness, rarely reaching toward the sense of social responsibility or duty towards others that animates the work of Lee and Johnson particularly. The correspondence between the work of Pater and of Foucault is not coincidental: Foucault was, in his final years, seeking like Pater to build an ethic upon a sceptical foundation. In the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality* (1984), his final work, Foucault finds 'moral' behaviours to be interesting less in themselves than for the 'arts of existence' or 'practices of the self' that lie behind them. Foucault establishes four points in which technologies of self may differ. The first is 'the determination of ethical substance', the part of oneself that is typically seen as the site of ethical activity. For example, in one culture the ethical substance of marital fidelity will be limited to genital activity, while in another, the ethical substance may include passing whims and fancies. Second is the 'mode of subjection', which determines the relation one considers oneself as having to a particular behaviour: are you faithful to your spouse because you are in a position of power, because you are the inheritor of a spiritual tradition, or because you consider faithfulness to underpin social or psychological stability? Third is the 'ethical work', the behaviour that one adopts in order to ensure that one remains 'moral': does one allow one's spouse access to private lines of communication to ensure that one is not tempted to use them unfaithfully? Finally, there is the '*telos*', the desired end or form of being of which this 'moral' behaviour forms a part. The faithful marriage can lead to a productive partnership, a business relationship, a spiritual communion, or a stable family, while it may form part of a much larger moral *telos*, such as self-discipline or happiness. When using the word *telos* in this chapter, it will be to this definition that I will be referring, and I will reserve the word *ethic* for use in Foucault's sense, as a style rather than rule of behaviour.

I begin by outlining a possible ethic that may be read into *The Renaissance*, particularly its famous ‘Conclusion’, and assessing the degree to which it might be understood as including a continent sexuality. I will then compare this to the double *telos*, the communally-minded ‘love’ and the more individualist ‘health’, proposed in *Marius the Epicurean*, again privileging the sexual element. These texts, more than any others, were read by proponents of the aesthetic life throughout the late nineteenth century and beyond, and read frequently for the practical guidance that they could offer. I will then explore the common perception of Pater as attracted to the unhealthy, the morbid, and the perverse. Far from contrasting with the above reading, I propose, it is possible to consider sexual continence to be an essential part of the temperance that Pater can be read as suggesting may, by operating as a safeguard, allow the aesthete to experience such things without being corrupted by them. This will involve extension into Pater’s wider work, such as *Imaginary Portraits* (1887) and *Plato and Platonism* (1893).

The Renaissance

Though by no means a statement of moral rule, the ‘Conclusion’ to *The Renaissance* tentatively outlines an ethic in the Foucauldian sense. This distinction between prescriptive morality and ethic, and the problematic tendency for readers to elide it, was recognized by John Morley in his 1873 review. Pater, Morley wrote, had ‘no design of interfering with the minor or major morals of the world, but only of dealing with what we may perhaps call the accentuating portion of life [...], what remains for a man seriously to do or feel, over and above earning his living and respecting the

laws'.¹⁷ Pater acknowledged his appreciation of this clarification in a letter to Morley, giving thanks for his 'explanation of my ethical point of view, to which I fancy some readers have given a prominence I did not mean it to have'.¹⁸ It was arguably, however, not this ambiguity of scope that led to the most divergent readings of the 'Conclusion', but rather Pater's reluctance to provide practical guidance in the permissibility of actual behaviour. As the finale to a book in which every chapter emphasized the necessary place of the 'sensuous' in aesthetic experience, contemporary readers particularly agonized over the ground encompassed by Pater's use of this word. 'The peril of such a creed', wrote A. C. Benson, is that 'it is in the first place purely self-regarding, and in the second place that, stated in the form of abstract principles, it affords no bulwark against the temptation to sink from a pure and passionate beauty of perception into a grosser indulgence of sensuous delights'.¹⁹

This anxiety concerning potential sensuality was a common objection against a secular philosophy in the period, as Sara Lyons has shown.²⁰ It can also, however, be considered as the result of the excess of 'ethical work' in the Foucauldian sense, the number of roads by which Pater's ethical aim may appear to be reached. The 'ethical substance', the subject of this 'ethical work', intended here by Pater is, if anything, one's experience of the world, in all its perpetual flux. This experience is identified as a series of felt sensations, of 'pulses', of which there are only a 'counted number' available to each person.²¹ The sifting and marshalling of these pulses thus becomes the 'ethical work', the activity or behaviour through which one achieves the

¹⁷ John Morley, 'Mr Pater's Essays' (April, 1873), in *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*, ed. R. M. Seiler (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980), 63-73; 68.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁹ A. C. Benson, *Walter Pater* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 47.

²⁰ Sara Lyons, *Algernon Swinburne and Walter Pater: Victorian Aestheticism, Doubt and Secularisation* (Leeds: Legenda, 2015), *passim*.

²¹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry: The 1893 Text*, ed. Donald Hill (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980; first published 1873), 188. All further references, except where otherwise specified, will be to this edition and given in the text.

ethical life. Maintenance, discrimination, ‘to discriminate every moment’, gathering and grasping at pulsations, ‘curiously testing new opinions and courting new impressions’: these activities all indicate an ethical work, of which the most obvious *telos* is ‘ecstasy’ or ‘brilliancy’, an intensification of experience, ‘a quickened, multiplied consciousness’ (189-90). ‘To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life’ (189). There is, however, another, sneakier *telos*, that of freedom: ‘while all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment’ (189). Free, we may ask, of what? Such metaphysical freedom, especially in conjunction with a concept of ‘spirit’, figures heavily in German Idealist and Romantic thought, such as that of Hegel, Schiller, and Kant, and it may well be in this manner that Pater is using the phrase. But in the immediate context of ‘The Conclusion’, the phrasing also seems to suggest that one is aiming for a freedom from flux, from that very experience of melting with which the sentence began. It is the phrase ‘to set the spirit free’ that gives the impression that part of Pater’s intention is precisely to escape the implications of his scepticism rather than accept them, to counteract the sense of perpetual flux rather than embrace and luxuriate in it. A similar impression is given by the final paragraph of the ‘Winckelmann’ essay, where he adapts Hegel’s ideal of freedom – as ‘the highest destiny of the spirit’ – for a modernity burdened by scientific necessity, and represents art as that freedom’s only possible source.²²

This ethic, based as it is on the human condition, is initially suggested as appropriate for all, though the offence of having been found ‘to sleep before evening’, or having spent one’s time in ‘listlessness’, has only personal repercussions (189,

²² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, trans. Thomas Malcolm Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975; originally published in German as *Vorlesungen über die Ästhetik*, 1835), 97.

190). There are, Pater suggests, many ways of achieving his *telos*: ‘great passions may give us this quickened sense of life, ecstasy and sorrow of love, the various forms of enthusiastic activity, disinterested or otherwise, which come naturally to many of us’ (190). The only qualification is that it must really ‘yield you this fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness’ (190). But although this ethic is universal, Pater explicitly prefers the aesthetic approach to life, claiming that this course is chosen, not, at this point, by those temperamentally fitted to it, but by ‘the wisest’ who will spend their time in ‘art and song [...]’. For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake’ (190). Pater refrains, however, from mentioning any specific activities or behaviours that may or may not be included in an ethical life. His ‘art and song’ is loose enough to be firmly metaphoric – one needn’t actually engage in art production or musical performance, or even consumption of such, though these activities may well provide a successfully intense experience. We are given an *excess* of ethical work, a way of *being* rather than *doing* that can, in theory, apply to any activity: ‘only be sure it is passion’. One may grasp, as the experiencing self grasps, at certain suggestions that are lightly dropped into the text: physical beauty, ‘some form [that] grows perfect in hand or face’; the beauty of landscape, ‘some tone of the hills or the sea’; emotion, ‘some mood of passion’; scholarly debate, ‘insight or intellectual excitement’; the pursuit of art, ‘work of the artist’s hands’; or even friendship, ‘the face of one’s friend’ (188, 189). But these are, if anything, an indication of just how wide this field of experience can be. Contemporary critics cited this vagueness as a potential field of moral danger. Sidney Colvin, while accepting Pater’s ethic as appropriate for artists and critics, wrote: ‘but do not tell everybody that refined pleasure is the one end of life. By refined, they will understand the most refined they

know, and the most refined they know are gross; and the result will be not general refinement, but general indulgence'.²³

Crucially for this study, and as Colvin seems to suggest, Pater's 'ethical work' is wide enough to accommodate many kinds of sexual practice, including both the most active and the most austere. It is open to the sexually active to interpret 'great passions' and 'ecstasy and sorrow of love' as implying that sexuality is capable of full integration into this ethical life, of even becoming its main source of expression, an ethical substance in its own right. The 'face of one's friend' has been interpreted as a coded reference to a homosexual partner.²⁴ But it is also open to the sexually continent reader, especially if that reader is of an aesthetic temperament, to discern the division Pater carefully places between the 'ecstasy and sorrow of love' and 'the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake' (in the first edition, 'love of art for art's sake'); as though the lover, like the politician, scientist, or religious, were not excluded from an ethical life, but with the implication that theirs is not that of the aesthete (190). It is surely this division that led Symonds to accuse Pater's aesthetic ideal as 'careless of maintaining at any cost a vital connection with the universal instincts of humanity'. Elsewhere, Symonds was clear about the sexual content of his objection, writing: 'I cannot sympathise with Pater's theory of life [...]. I have always thought it the theory of one who has not lived & loved – of a Pagan, not a Papal soprano [castrato]'.²⁵ Both sexual constituencies can, and no doubt did, also go back through the essays of *The Renaissance* to find evidence to support

²³ [Sidney Colvin], review, *Pall Mall Gazette* (1 March, 1873), in *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Seiler, 47-54; 54.

²⁴ See, for instance, Daniel Orrells, 'Roman Receptions/Receptions of Rome', in *Ancient Rome and the Construction of Modern Homosexual Identities*, ed. Jennifer Ingelheart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 126-45; 126-27.

²⁵ John Addington Symonds, review, *Academy* (15 March, 1873), in *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Seiler, 57-61; 57; letter to Mary Robinson, 30 March 1885, *ibid.*, 124.

their position.²⁶ Hext has argued that while ‘Pater understands that sensation has an ambivalent power’, containing both liberating and destructive possibilities, yet it is the former that dominates *The Renaissance* with its emphasis on embodied sensation.²⁷ While I would in general support this reading, it is less difficult than Hext suggests to foreground sexually continent elements in *The Renaissance*, particularly after its second edition.

The closest that Pater comes to approving a sexual relationship, because of, rather than despite, its carnal nature, is in his references to the legend of Abelard and Héloïse in the opening essay, entitled ‘Aucassin and Nicolette’ in the first edition, and ‘Two Early French Stories’ in the second and subsequent editions. In lending his support to the theory of an earlier Renaissance in twelfth-century France, and the poetry of ‘romantic love’ to be found there, and to Jules Michelet’s theory that the spirit of the later Renaissance was foreshadowed in Abelard, he writes:

In that poetry, earthly passion, in its intimacy, its freedom, its variety – the liberty of the heart – makes itself felt; and the name of Abelard, the great clerk and the great lover, connects the expression of this liberty of heart with the free play of human intelligence round all subjects presented to it, with the liberty of the intellect, as that age understood it.²⁸

As ‘earthly passion’ is being defined against ‘human intelligence’, it seems unfair to instantly read ‘earthly’ as merely ‘erotic’ or ‘sexual’; earthly passion could easily refer to passion of any character for any material object, in the tradition of separating worldly from unworldly experience. Pater is, after all, careful to specify that the

²⁶ For the potential for Pater’s work, and particularly the two essays explored here, ‘Two Early French Stories’ and ‘Winckelmann’, to produce multiple and opposing readings, see Megan Becker-Leckrone, ‘Pater’s Critical Spirit’, in Brake *et al.* eds, *Transparencies of Desire*, 286-97.

²⁷ Hext, *Walter Pater*, 102.

²⁸ Walter Pater, *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (London: Macmillan, 1873), 2. For Pater’s use of Michelet for his discussion of Abelard, see David DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene in Victorian England: Newman, Arnold, and Pater* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 348.

Renaissance involved a blossoming of ‘the love of the things of the intellect and the imagination for their own sake’.²⁹ But this hesitancy becomes harder as the passage advances: such passion is typified by one of the greatest ‘lovers’ of the age. True, this ‘great lover’ is again idealized primarily for his ‘human intelligence’; later, in *Plato and Platonism*, Pater described Plato in similar terms, though representing him as turning deliberately away from the carnal. Although ‘Plato himself had not been always a mere Platonic lover’, knowing ‘all the ways of lovers, in the literal sense’, yet he learns to turn ‘the discipline of sensuous love’ to ‘the world of intellectual abstractions’.³⁰ But in further describing Abelard, Pater’s references to ‘the temptations of the scholar’ – to his judgement that, in his relationship with Héloïse, for ‘one who knew so well to assign its exact value to every abstract idea, those restraints which lie on the consciences of other men had been relaxed’ – does seem to be nudging us towards the conclusion that such ‘liberty of heart’ (a phrase which is echoed in the passion that will ‘set the spirit free’ in the ‘Conclusion’) is found precisely in a state that leads a man to renounce the sexual, rather than merely sensuous, restraints of an austere religion.³¹ And it is this experience, this widening of possibilities, that triggers or typifies the Renaissance:

And so from the rooms of that shadowy house by the Seine side we see that spirit going abroad, with its qualities already well-defined, its intimacy, its languid sweetness, its rebellion, its subtle skill in dividing the elements of human passion, its care for physical beauty, its worship of the body; which penetrated the early literature of Italy, and finds an echo in Dante.³²

²⁹ Pater, *The Renaissance* (1973), 1.

³⁰ Walter Pater, *Plato and Platonism: A Series of Lectures* (London: Macmillan, 1910; first published 1893), 136, 140. All further references will be to this edition and given in the text.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³² *Ibid.*, 3.

Again, the correspondence in this passage of the ‘spirit going abroad’ with the ‘set the spirit free’ of ‘The Conclusion’ may particularly encourage an association of this sexualized Renaissance with an ideal mode of life.

Yet in the second edition of *The Renaissance*, from which the controversial ‘Conclusion’ was removed, Pater did not prune this episode, but rather expanded it. The expansions did not expunge the sexual content of the relationship between Abelard and Héloïse, but made the connection between this and the ‘spirit’ that they typify appear less necessary. In the previous edition, the direct continuation from Abelard and Héloïse to ‘Aucassin and Nicolette’ had served to accentuate the association between ‘liberty of heart’ and sexual passion. This time, however, Pater, in an otherwise strange move, introduces a second twelfth-century story into his study of the Renaissance. The narrative of ‘Li Amitiez de Ami et Amile’ is centred around the friendship between two men. It is now widely read as a part of a barely coded network of homosexual reference in *The Renaissance*, engaging a discourse in which male ‘friendship’ is used to indicate romantic and sexual connections. Certainly Pater’s relation of Amis and Amile’s story is strongly coloured by the modern Hellenic cult of friendship which Linda Dowling has shown to have existed in Pater’s Oxford, and which embraced a wide church from the homosocial to the actively homosexual. Pater frankly makes this connection himself: ‘such comradeship, though instances of it are to be found everywhere, is still especially a classical motive’ (7). Dowling has also, however, warned against prescriptive readings of such ‘code’, indicating their reduction of ‘the range of sexual stylizations as they were actually experienced in the later nineteenth century’.³³ Further, David Halperin has emphasized the dangers of mistaking such ‘classical’ friendship, in which absolute

³³ Dowling, ‘Ruskin’s Pied Beauty’, 1-2.

equality is stressed, for male same-sex sexual relations, which in the classical period were generally based heavily in hierarchy.³⁴ There is every reason to assume that Pater, in this deliberately less provocative second edition, was relying on the late-Victorian discourse of romantic friendship between heterosexual same-sex pairs to render his lingering over this story uncontroversial, whatever his own feelings on the question.³⁵

The friendship between Amis and Amile can be understood to be essentially physical, reliant on their admiration for each other's physical beauty, but not actively sexual or even necessarily erotic. The two are physically identical, and Pater emphasizes his approval of the presence, in the story, of two identical cups, which have 'that well-known effect of a beautiful object' (8). The importance of embodied aesthetic pleasure, in his appreciation of both the story and of the friendship it relates, is clearly essential. Many contemporary critics who otherwise stress Pater's 'restraint' or 'reserve' note this centrality of sensation. By 1897 Lionel Johnson felt the need to re-emphasize Pater's love of sensuousness: 'Let us have done with the fabled Mr. Pater of a strict and strait solemnity, that travesty false and foolish! Flesh and blood, life multiform and variegated, things charged and eloquent with humane emotion [...], among that moved the loving and patient genius of the man'.³⁶ But alongside physical sensation, Pater is also, as Johnson would have been first to note, careful to stress the 'purity' of ideal sensuous friendship:

that free play of human affection, of the claims of which Abelard's story is an assertion, makes itself felt in the incidents of a great friendship, a friendship

³⁴ David Halperin, 'How to Do the History of Male Homosexuality', in Donald E. Hall *et al.* eds, *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader* (London: Routledge, 2013), 262-86; 270.

³⁵ See Carolyn Oulton, *Romantic Friendship in Victorian Literature* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

³⁶ Lionel Johnson, 'Mr. Pater's Humour' (first published 1897), in *Post Liminium: Essays and Critical Papers*, ed. Thomas Whittemore (London: Elkin Mathews, 1912), 11-14; 12.

pure and generous, pushed to a sort of passionate exhalation, and more than faithful unto death (7).

Though the word 'pure' may not refer exclusively to sexual purity, the possibility of its doing so here, and the effect that such an interpretation has on readings of *The Renaissance* as a whole, should not be underestimated. The passage translated and presented by Pater begins when Amis has contracted leprosy, 'so that his wife would not approach him, and wrought to strangle him', and can be read as illustrating the triumph of friendship over sexual (marital) love when it comes to 'human affection' (8). Physicality, the appreciation of sensuous beauty, is undeniably essential to Pater's idea of the 'liberal' spirit. But sexuality, though able – as for Abelard – to be accommodated within this spirit, can be understood as an inessential element, so that the ideal is possible as much in a close friendship as in a sexual relationship.

This reading might be supported by turning to that other site of admiration for homosocial, potentially erotic friendship, the 'Winckelmann' essay. There, Winckelmann's temperamental affinity with the Hellenic spirit is said to be shown by 'his romantic, fervent friendships with young men' (152), the age difference this time emphasizing a potentially sexual content. More particularly, 'these friendships, bringing him into contact with the pride of human form, and staining the thoughts with its bloom, perfected his reconciliation to the spirit of Greek sculpture'; and as Pater goes on to argue that sculpture is an expression of all that is typically Hellenic in Greek art, this comes to much the same thing (152). But as in the case of Amis and Amile, though Pater must be seen to at least nod towards the homosexual nature of these 'friendships', he is nevertheless careful to specify their sexually continent nature: 'of passion, of physical excitement, they contain only just so much as stimulates the eye to the finest delicacies of colour and form' (154). What matters

here is not that Winckelmann's friendships actually were sexually continent, or even whether Pater actually believed them to be, but only that he claims that they were. Benson takes advantage of Pater's emphasis on continence here when he writes that 'in Winckelmann he found one who could devote himself to the passionate contemplation of beauty, without any taint or grossness of sense'.³⁷ Even Frank Harris, notorious for his (occasionally imaginative) outing of *fin-de-siècle* sexuality, and persuaded of Pater's inclination to, if not his practice of, 'strange sins', cites the above passage as among all his writing the most 'soul-revealing', showing that 'his physical hold on life was so slight that his desire merely led him to a finer appreciation of the beauties of art'.³⁸ It would of course have been inadvisable to refer openly to homosexuality in a biography of this time, and it may be that such descriptions of Pater's lack of sexual desire were shaped by this fact. But whether or not such biographical references constitute a gesture towards or rationalization of a sexuality that could not easily be expressed, it remains pertinent that what Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best would call the 'surface' meaning – sexual continence – was repeatedly felt to be appropriate when describing Pater's work. Textually, taking Pater at his word here is compatible with the remainder of the essay: he admits, no doubt controversially and with no small risk, that the nature of these friendships with young men is *potentially* sexual, yet the fact that they are not, that the sensuousness integral to these relationships does not go beyond the stimulation of the eye, is an important, though subtle, distinction. This distinction, I would suggest, becomes particularly pertinent to the reader concerned with Pater's ethics given that, in 'Winckelmann', Hellenism, or a modern appropriation of the Hellenic spirit, is proposed as a model for the aesthetic life. That Pater's Hellenism and aestheticism came to be seen as one

³⁷ Benson, *Walter Pater*, 14.

³⁸ Frank Harris, 'Walter Pater', in *Contemporary Portraits: Second Series* (New York: Frank Harris, 1919), 203-26; 203, 226.

and the same is shown in Greenslet's description of 'Winckelmann' as 'a defence of the Hellenic or aesthetical view of life'.³⁹ Benson called this essay 'a species of manifesto'.⁴⁰

In his discussion of Greek sculpture, Pater introduces his concern with the difference between the temporal and the universal. Having stated, with reference to Hegel, that the 'spirit' of every age contains both that which is contingent, the circumstances of the day, and that which is permanent, to be found potentially in all phases of humanity, he wonders, 'can we bring down that ideal into the gaudy, perplexed light of modern life?' (181-82). The answer is, with qualifications, yes; and success in doing so will result in the aesthetic life. The Hellenic life, Pater asserts, is one of self-culture, in which one's life is treated in the manner of art, specifically sculpture. He quotes Hegel:

For those who act, as well as those who create and think, have, in those beautiful days of Greece, this plastic character. They are great and free, and have grown up on the soil of their own individuality, creating themselves out of themselves, and moulding themselves to what they were, and willed to be. (175).

That this mode of life, described, in Arnoldian manner, as 'culture', is possible in the modern world, had been, Pater claims, demonstrated by Goethe, who uses Hellenism, its 'balance [and] unity with one's self', as a corrective to the 'perplexed currents of modern thought' (182).⁴¹ As such, modern Hellenism, and the aesthetic realization of Pater's ethic, which itself was formed as a way of escaping the effects of the perpetual flux of an epistemologically sceptical philosophy, become virtually indistinguishable.

³⁹ Greenslet, *Walter Pater*, 24.

⁴⁰ Benson, *Walter Pater*, 27.

⁴¹ For more on Pater's 'Winckelmann' as a direct response to Arnold (1869), see DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, 206.

The ethical work of the 'Conclusion', all that grasping, discriminating and selecting of pulsations, is here expanded upon for the *aesthetic* person specifically.

Most obviously, Pater sets up an intermediate *telos* that is also in itself a sort of ethical work, the acquisition of certain qualities, defined here as Hellenic, that will act almost as an artistic conscience, a standard or ideal against which to test the process of ethical work and its results. This *telos* is not separate from, but is subordinate to that of the 'Conclusion', the 'quickened and multiplied consciousness'. The two main characteristics which Pater, following Winckelmann's adoption of Hegelian terms, attributes to the aesthetic ethic of Hellenism are: '*Heiterkeit* – blitheness or repose, and *Allgemeinheit* – generality or breadth' (170). Having introduced these terms, he immediately specifies that 'breadth' should not be understood as indiscriminate expansion or, when applied to life, only a kind of license:

But that generality or breadth has nothing in common with the lax observation, the unlearned thought, the flaccid execution, which have sometimes claimed superiority in art, on the plea of being 'broad' or 'general'. Hellenic breadth and generality come of a culture minute, severe, constantly renewed, rectifying and concentrating its impressions into certain pregnant types (170).

Discipline, then, is to be associated with the acquisition of Hellenic breadth. As for the Tractarian celibate, discipline operates at once as *telos* and 'ethical work', both the means to and the end of the successful aesthetic life (cf. 94). This note is struck again and again throughout the essay, and throughout Pater's work in general, and became a defining characteristic for many of his contemporary readers. 'The duty of absolute discipline', wrote Johnson, 'appealed to him as a thing of price'.⁴² When applied to life, Pater says, disciplined 'breadth' will include a constant renewing of experience,

⁴² Johnson, 'Mr. Pater and His Public' (first published 1900), in *Post Liminium*, 14-19; 15.

the refusal to be limited by dogma (as outlined in the 'Conclusion'). But such wide experience is required only to the end that each new thing be tested against the ideal, an ideal which will become slightly different for every person. 'The proper instinct of self-culture cares not so much to reap all that those various forms of genius can give, as to find in them its own strength' (183).

And then, 'in every direction it is a law of restraint', he says. 'It keeps passion always below that degree of intensity at which it must necessarily be transitory' (172). Here we have the first association of excessive passion with the perpetual flux, while a low heat like that of Winckelmann (in Pater's representation) in his relations with young men, is associated with a Hellenic permanence. It is not impossible to imagine a sexual relationship that would allow and even encourage such self-culture, but such an interpretation is becoming more and more difficult. It is true, again, that the essay does emphasize the necessarily physical element of Hellenism, its tactile side, in which the intellectual and the sensuous are perfectly fused. Winckelmann 'apprehended the subtlest principles of the Hellenic manner, not through the understanding, but by instinct or touch' (154); and this too is characteristically Hellenic. But, though such relation with the concrete and sensuously apprehendable is clearly essential to Pater's understanding of Hellenism, he is nevertheless eager to impose upon it a limit, a restraint that Pater's earlier mention of Winckelmann's 'friendships' with young men urges us to connect to sexual restraint.

It is in this spirit that Pater describes the ideal attitude of the aesthete engaged in self-culture as 'a kind of passionate coldness' (183). Arthur Symonds echoes this phrase in a description of Pater as characterized by his 'gift and cultivation of a

passionate temperance'.⁴³ Even when again trying to emphasize (as if this were the element likely to be missed) the necessary sensuousness of the all engagements with art, Pater concedes that sexual activity is not quite what he has in mind for the artist. 'He may live, as Keats lived, a pure life; but his soul, like that of Plato's false astronomer, becomes more and more immersed in sense, until nothing which lacks the appeal to sense has interest for him' (176-77). Foregrounding these elements of Pater's argument harmonizes with his assertion that the beauty of Greek sculpture was 'a sexless beauty: the statues of the gods had the least traces of sex. Here there is a moral sexlessness, a kind of ineffectual wholeness of nature, yet with a true beauty and significance of its own' (176). In an earlier essay, entitled 'Diaphanéité', Pater uses very similar words to describe an ideal character, described by Benson as 'narrow and potent'.⁴⁴

The 'Winckelmann' essay, then, read in conjunction with the 'Conclusion' (which directly follows it), gathers together some of Pater's main ethical concerns in a way that suggests, to those open to such suggestion, that a sexually austere practice may be appropriate to an aesthetic way of life. It becomes associated with an attitude in which physical sensuousness is brought to bear on all experience and all assessment of that experience, but in a way that is restrained, disciplined, observant and inactive, a 'passionate coldness'. Passion, in this reading, is to be fostered within oneself, rather than necessitating interaction with others, and thus never becomes sensual. As Benson puts it, 'to the serious student, pleasure and joy must always have a certain bracing austerity; might be sipped, perhaps, held up the light, dwelt upon,

⁴³ Arthur Symons, 'Introduction', *The Renaissance* (New York: The Modern Library, 1919), xi-xxiv; xiii.

⁴⁴ Pater, 'Diaphanéité', read at Oxford in 1864, first published in *Miscellaneous Studies: A Series of Essays*, ed. Charles L. Shadwell (London: Macmillan, 1895), 215-22; Benson, *Walter Pater*, 10.

but not plunged into nor rioted upon'.⁴⁵ This in turn is presented as a way of escaping the limits of contingency, of the perpetual flux as figured in the 'Conclusion'. And though it is feasible that this continent mode of life may have been particularly attractive to readers attempting to control or suppress homosexual desires in a society that disallowed the expression of such – Benson himself is likely an example of such homosexual continence – yet this very appeal relies upon its conformity to a mode of productive continence that would have been readily recognizable and acceptable within wider Victorian society.

Love and Health: Marius the Epicurean

These concerns – the relative transience of sexual pleasure, and the twin attractions of sensuous intensity and Hellenic breadth to be gained through continence, especially for the aesthete – are expanded upon in the 1885 novel *Marius the Epicurean*, where Pater self-confessedly experiments with the way in which this so far still abstract philosophizing might be applied. The aesthetic ethic is again tested against a more general *telos*: not this time, however, the mere negative or evasive effort to counter the flux, an impulse for which the multitude of possible routes apparently sanctioned by the 'Conclusion' had led him to grief; but rather the positive, dual human demand, as he expresses it, for on the one hand the communal value of 'love', and, on the other, the individual value of 'health'. One of the most consistent criticisms of the 'Conclusion' had been the censure of its selfish self-centredness, its strident individualism. Margaret Oliphant had objected to its emphasis on 'that Me who is the

⁴⁵ Benson, *ibid.*, 18.

centre of the *dilettante's* world'.⁴⁶ Such criticisms would not cease after *Marius*: it is this book that Yeats charged with having 'taught us to walk upon a rope stretched through serene air', while Wilde saw *Marius* as 'little more than a spectator'.⁴⁷ Still in *Marius* Pater first attempted to redress the excessive individualism charged to his aesthetic ethics, and again sexual continence can be read as occupying a central position.

Marius deals much more fully and explicitly with multiple competing ethics, and their practical manifestations, than either the 'Conclusion' or 'Winckelmann'. *Marius*, along with other characters, is compelled toward the formation of ethics, with the result that these ethics are always in a state of becoming. As the product of a sceptical 'mode of subjection', they themselves constantly undergo a process of questioning and testing. But these competing ethics are also underwritten by a universal *telos*, to which any identification of 'ethical substance', 'mode of subjection', and 'ethical work' must be fitted if it is to be permanently satisfactory. Each ethic in *Marius* is tested against a relatively stable conception of the demands of human nature, its 'moral and intellectual need', elements of which come in and out of focus as various ethics succeed and fail in satisfying them.⁴⁸ Such a conception of the importance of human nature – what David DeLaura calls the 'complex vision of man's permanent moral and aesthetic needs' that Pater shared with Matthew Arnold and John Henry Newman – had been hinted at in *The Renaissance*, in Abelard's recognition of 'the higher needs of humanity' (6), but the theme had not been

⁴⁶ Margaret Oliphant, review, *Blackwood's Magazine* (November, 1873), in *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Seiler, 85-91; 87.

⁴⁷ W. B. Yeats, *Collected Works*, general eds Richard J. Finneran and George Mills Harper, vol. 3: *Autobiographies*, eds William H. O'Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1999; this section first published 1922), 235; Oscar Wilde, 'Epistola: In Carcere et Vinculis', in *Complete Works*, general eds Ian Small and Russell Jackson, vol. 2, ed. Ian Small (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 34-155; 109.

⁴⁸ Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1910; first published 1885), vol. 2, 71. All further references will be to this edition and given in the text.

expanded upon there.⁴⁹ It was recognized, too, by contemporary reviewers: an anonymous reviewer in *Harper's New Magazine* described *Marius* as testing various ethics against 'the inherited morality and commonsense of the world', while William Sharp saw it as trying whether they were 'responsive to man's deepest aspirations'.⁵⁰

The two volumes in which *Marius* was initially published are organized around two such universally necessary elements, love (or sympathy) and health, which issue from an underlying set of assumptions or beliefs about the conditions under which humanity is apt to be contented. Such a conception, I will argue, could be understood as including a more or less limited sexual practice as part of the ethical necessities of humanity, while a continent life is suggested as appropriate to the aesthete. In this section, therefore, I look first at the conception of human need that underlies *Marius*, and the place of sexuality within it, before going on to demonstrate how love and health are used as markers to test the correspondence between any given ethic and this universal need.

'Perhaps', ponders Marius, at a turning point in his meditative career, 'all theories of practice tend, as they rise to their best, as understood by their worthiest representatives, to identification with each other'. This similarity, he conjectures, seems to be a 'savor of unworldliness', an 'ideal of temperance or moderation' (vol. 2, 20, 21); from which he concludes that such temperance is a necessary part of any ethic. He is, of course, involving himself here in a tangle of value-judgements. It may be interesting that all systems of practical ethics involve, in some of their manifestations, a valuation of temperance. But the judgement that these manifestations constitute the 'best' that each system has to offer refers to a presupposed valuation of temperance itself. The narration does not draw attention to

⁴⁹ DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, xvii.

⁵⁰ [Unsigned review], *Harper's New Magazine* (May, 1885), in *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Seiler, 138-41, 140; William Sharp, review, *Athenaeum* (28 February, 1885), *ibid.*, 113-16, 115.

this rational pitfall. The omission can potentially be understood to indicate that a presupposed value of temperance is an essential part of the larger network of values created across the novel, the truth of which Marius is only gradually brought to realize, though he may be seen to have been instinctually moving towards it from an early age. It is through these value networks, as well as the various ethical systems that are brought forward, that the novel potentially moves towards an ethic that might be applied to all, while Marius's personal apprehension of and eventual acceptance of these values indicates their importance to a specifically aesthetic ethic. These networks of values can be roughly divided into groups of undesirable and desirable quantities, all of which connect to and reinforce each other. As in the *Renaissance*, but much more clearly, these values centre on the temporal and the permanent. In the undesirable group can be found: the fleeting or ephemeral (however much Pater may elsewhere admire this quality), that which decays, the worldly, the excessively bodily, the carnal, and the selfish. Against this group are set, as desirable: the stable, that which is permanent, the sufficiently unworldly, the balanced, the chaste, and the communal.

It is possible to identify the first of these groups, the undesirable, throughout the novel in a continuing strand of loose symbolism, in which roses, as well as being beautiful and delightful to the senses, appear when it is convenient to the author to indicate a connection between the fleeting nature of such beauty, and selfish passions and pleasures, typified by the carnal. Roses first appear in Pater's retelling of the story of the 'Golden Ass', where the hero Lucius, in attempting to use a witch's ointment to transform himself into a 'cupid', and a 'pretty maid-servant' into a 'Venus', accidentally turns himself into an ass, a malady that can only be cured through a 'supper of roses' (vol. 1, 59). Such are almost impossible to acquire in 'that adverse

season', and the cure begins to look like punishment as Lucius is reduced to taking part in 'the grotesque procession of Isis', in which he 'suddenly crunches the chaplet of roses carried in the High-priest's hands' (vol. 1, 59, 60). Roses also appear in the sick room of Flavian, as Marius procures 'rare Paestum roses, and the like' to celebrate a supposed recovery (vol. 1, 112). Much could be made, in readings concerned with homosexual innuendo or coding, of these roses' being specified as both Greek (Paestum being an important city of the ancient Greek empire in what is now Italy) and also, like so many roses in *Marius*, unnaturally out of season. Flavian is associated with a kind of Epicureanism that falls into sensual hedonism: 'he had certainly yielded himself [...] to the seductions of that luxurious town [Pisa]' (vol. 1, 52-53). Marius is surprised at 'the extent of his early corruption', so that 'to Marius, at a later time, he counted for as it were an epitome of the whole pagan world, the depth of its corruption, and its perfection of form' (vol. 1, 53). Flavian, though undoubtedly attractive, is also described as a warning of what Epicureanism can become, a fate from which Marius is saved by his 'instinctive seriousness' (vol. 1, 13). Flavian also introduces Marius to scepticism, as he 'believed only in himself, in the brilliant, and mainly sensuous gifts, he had, or meant to acquire' (vol. 1, 52). This is not to say that Flavian is represented as a 'bad' influence on Marius, or as undesirable in himself. But the qualities that he represents are seen to lead, as has often been noted, to an undesirable end, his 'dying passively, like some dumb creature' (vol. 1, 118).⁵¹ And he not only dies with roses in his room, but from a sickness contracted during that same 'grotesque' ceremony of Isis, connected closely with Venus, that had been described by Apuleius, and during which he and Marius

⁵¹ See William F. Shuter, *Rereading Walter Pater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 92-108, and Lee Behlman, 'Burning, Burial, and the Critique of Stoicism in Walter Pater's *Marius the Epicurean*', *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, 31:1 (Spring, 2004), 133-56.

had seen the high priest, bearing in his hands ‘those well-remembered roses’ (vol. 1, 107).

After this, roses, and sometimes flowers in general, consistently appear in conjunction with circumstances suited to remind readers of the vanity as well as the beauty of selfish, carnal pleasures. Of the sensual co-emperor Lucius Verus, Pater says: ‘he had come to love his delicacies best out of season, and would have gilded the very flowers’ (vol. 1, 195). On being invited to the palace of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, Marius notes that the child Commodus, soon to undo all the moral good done by his father, stands ‘impatiently plucking a rose to pieces over the hearth’ (vol. 1, 218). An extravagant party is decorated with ‘the dusky fires of the rare twelve-petalled roses’ (vol. 2, 78); while the conversation on the impossibility of knowledge between Lucian and a young student takes place ‘immediately above the fragrant borders of a rose-farm’ (vol. 2, 144). When Marius begins to question the sufficiency of his own Epicureanism, ‘long after the very latest roses were faded [...] he remained behind in Rome; anxious to try the lastingness of his own Epicurean rose-garden’ (vol. 2, 14). Whether one credits this chain of rose imagery as intentional or not, it certainly seems that Pater often introduces physical beauty and temporality together in a manner that draws attention to their relationship.

Lastingness, Marius finds, is precisely what his rose-garden does not have, however beautiful it has been (and this beauty is certainly not denied, as will be indicated in the final section of this chapter). Although the scepticism on which his Epicureanism, which is of course very like that philosophy outlined or gestured towards in the ‘Conclusion’, is built, means that his enjoyment of experiences is ‘but enhanced, like the glow of summer itself, by the thought of its brevity’, yet he feels ‘an inward need of something permanent in its character, to hold by’ (vol. 2, 17-18).

If fleetingness is associated here with selfish wastefulness (characterized particularly by indulgence in carnal pleasure), then it will be no surprise to find lastingness connected to love within a community and family, but a family that is supported by a strict curtailment of carnality, an ideal that he calls ‘chastity’. The need for these things is presented by the narration as part of a universal human nature, tied to the need to escape death through the survival of the community of which one has formed a part.

It is therefore as a drawing together of all that has been represented as valuable throughout the novel that love, in the second volume, is founded as a universal *telos*. On first visiting the Christian household of Cecilia, Marius is granted ‘the vision of a natural, a scrupulously natural, love, transforming, by some new gift of insight into the truth of human relationships, and under the urgency of some new motive by him so far unfathomable, all the conditions of life’ (vol. 2, 109). Christianity, in basing its doctrine in a high valuation of compassion and sympathy, of love, has discovered a way of life more ultimately satisfying than Marius’s Epicureanism. In practice, this is characterized by a subordination of one’s own desires to the needs of others weaker than oneself: a principle that manifests itself, among other things, in chastity, the beauty of which appeals to the temperamentally aesthetic Marius:

Chastity, – as he seemed to understand – the chastity of men and women, amid all the conditions, and with the results, proper to such chastity, is the most beautiful thing in the world and the truest conservation of that creative energy by which men and women were first brought into it (vol. 2, 110).

As Gerald Monsman notes, Pater is here echoing Renan’s 1882 book *Marc Aurèle et La fin du monde antique*: ‘La femme chaste est la plus belle chose du monde, le plus

parfait souvenir de la création primitive de Dieu'.⁵² Renan, in the relevant passage, is summarizing from various sections of the *Clementine Homilies*, dated by him to the reign of Marcus Aurelius. Pater can thus be understood to be grounding his description of the chastity of Cecilia's house not only in appropriate Christian sources, but also in those Fathers whose emphasis on productive sexual continence I describe in my previous chapter. But he also adds to Renan's phrasing, extending the beauty of chastity to men, and also changing the passively reflective, potentially Platonic 'souvenir' to a more physical and active 'conservation', suggesting that 'creative energy' is not only something residing in men and women, but a quality over which they might exercise more active control: to conserve or not to conserve. Pater's version of chastity is therefore far more reminiscent of a sexually regulative discourse than that of Renan.

This reassessment of the mechanism of chastity is consistent with the idea, detected by Sussman in the 'Conclusion' and elsewhere, that the energy used during sexual activity particularly can be reserved and used in other contexts. In *Marius*, this Christian use of chastity leads, in a manner identified by Sussman as Carlylean, to a redeployment of energy towards labour. 'Chastity, in turn, realised in the whole scope of its conditions, fortified that rehabilitation of peaceful labour, after the mind, the pattern, of the workman of Galilee' (vol. 2, 114).⁵³ And the use of the phrase 'creative energy' in *Marius* may well make one wonder if artistic production or even aesthetic living could perhaps be contained within this labour, particularly as Pater makes the connection between this Christian spirit of chaste love, and the humane spirit that arises in the artistic culture of Renaissance Italy, referring to 'that regenerate type of

⁵² Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, ed. Gerald Monsman (Kansas City: Valancourt Books, 2008), 230; Ernest Renan, *Histoire des origines du Christianisme*, vol. 7, *Marc-Aurèle et la fin du monde antique* (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1883), 91.

⁵³ See Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*, 16-72.

humanity, which, centuries later, Giotto and his successors, down to the best and purest days of the young Raphael, working under conditions very friendly to the imagination, were to conceive as an artistic ideal' (vol. 2, 110).

Sexual moderation may be found as a function of 'temperance' in the 'worthiest representatives' of each philosophic system, we may feel, possibly because it answers to a network of humane necessities, and avoids those behaviours that prevent their fulfilment. And indeed it can be seen in every ethical system found in *Marius*, from the priest of Aesculapius who warns Marius to 'be temperate in thy religious notions, in love, in wine, in all things, and of a peaceful heart with thy fellows' (vol. 1, 33), through the Stoic Marcus Aurelius, to the chaste Christians. Of course, not all of these examples imply entire sexual abstention. Marcus Aurelius is married to the famously promiscuous Empress Faustina, and has children; and his interactions with these children do much to soften his iron Stoic philosophy. Likewise, though Cecilia is described as 'chaste' and 'virginal', she is nevertheless a widow who is always seen surrounded by children, both her own and those of others. Full approval seems to be given to sexual passion that produces not only children, but also all the affections and sympathies of family life, though a strictly curtailed sexuality may nevertheless be understood to be essential to the full enjoyment of these. This conception of chaste love within marriage was dear to many in Victorian Britain, as was seen in Jowett's reading of Plato in Chapter One (cf. 81).

But although such domestic sexuality is sanctioned, the enjoyment of the affections it creates is not limited to those who engage in sexual relationships. Marius himself can be understood as celibate, or at least, there is nothing to suggest otherwise: he considers marrying Cecilia, but he soon withdraws and does not seek marriage with any of her household. We are told that he avoids the more raucous

pleasures that Rome affords: 'it was to no wasteful and vagrant affections, such as these, that his Epicureanism had committed him' (vol. 1, 187). We may remember that it was this sentence in particular that Le Gallienne describes his aesthetic young protagonist taking council from in *Young Lives* (cf. 25). And Marius was certainly read as continent by reviewers. The anonymous *Harper's* reviewer, conjecturing that 'if Marius had only fallen in love, he would have been much less absorbed in himself', concludes also that 'if Marius had fallen in love, there would not have been the long tale of a subjective and contemplative life to tell'. Marius's sexual continence is, this reviewer suggests, vital not only to the content, but also the form of the book. Further, G. E. Woodberry, reviewing for *Nation*, wondered:

Why was it [...] that he, being so attached to sensation and the emotions that cling closest to it, rejected voluptuousness, with all its forms of beauty and joyfulness, as a thing essentially not beautiful nor joyful? What was it that kept him, the comrade of Flavian, who represents the pagan surrender to this life, pure – so pure indeed, that with his visionary sense he foresaw in chastity an ideal that was to be, and foreknew its supreme beauty?⁵⁴

An indication of what Marius gains from being 'pure' can be found in his death scene. He is not, we find, excluded by his sexual abstention from the familial sympathy that characterizes early Christianity. When he is dying, Marius recognizes that family and children could have provided a comfort to the dying soul, as suggesting a kind of permanent residence or legacy in the world; but still, even in his unmarried state, his affection for those who are to survive him, and his hope that such affections and their valuation will spread through the world as Christianity expands, provide a comparable solace. The community, the family in which he has, through his sacrifice for Cornelius, found a place, survives him. 'It was thus too, surprised,

⁵⁴ Unsigned review, *Harper's Monthly Magazine*, 140; G. E. Woodberry, review, *Nation* (10 September, 1885), in *Walter Pater: The Critical Heritage*, Seiler ed., 144-51; 147-48.

delighted, that Marius, under the power of that new hope among men, could think of the generations to come after him' (vol. 2, 22). There is in this something of the ideal of a community of families overseen by a celibate leader found in the work of Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian (cf. 88).

A very similar hope, couched in terms of this same communal, humane spirit, can be found in several of the unfinished manuscripts not published after Pater's death. In 'The Aesthetic Life', in which he argues that 'the life of sensation suggests its own moral code, has its own conscience, clear and near, and with no problematic assumptions', Pater wonders if this aesthetic morality may lead to a communal, sociable ethic: 'might such a temper, you ask, be extended further still, and, by modifying practice generally, present itself as a theory or principle of service to other men's lives?'⁵⁵ And at the end of this manuscript he notes, 'In morals again, always, there are 2 aims – art in itself supplies the age figures of temperance & for charity, for unselfishness'.⁵⁶

This hope for sociability in the aesthetic life is explicitly connected to sexual continence at the end of the extant manuscripts for *Gaston de Latour*, unpublished until relatively recently.⁵⁷ There Pater speaks of 'cruel or unkindly, as opposed to kindly, love' (99), the first being destructive, servile and carnal, and the second creative, reciprocal and spiritual. Gaston is then taken by a friend to an exhibition of fifteenth-century Italian painting, where he realizes that sixteenth-century France is an embodiment of unkindly love, and but a reflection of that earlier Renaissance wherein the true spirit of kindly love was to be found:

⁵⁵ Walter Pater, 'The Aesthetic Life', Cambridge MA, Harvard University, Houghton Library, *The Pater Manuscripts*, bMS.Eng1150(7); 9, 37.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁵⁷ Walter Pater, *Gaston de Latour: The Revised Text*, ed. Gerald Monsman (Greensboro: ELT Press, 1995). All references will be to this edition and given in the text. Monsman's additions are given, following his practice, in square brackets.

Kindness [...] in the love of visible beauty, the eyes, the lips kindled to the reproduction of its like, renewing the world, handing on, as a ground of love and kindness for ever, the beauty which had kindled it, the likeness of, or an improvement upon, itself, kindling a like love in turn, linking paternally, filially, age to age, the young to the old, marriage, maternity, childhood and youth (134-35).

As Gerald Monsman has suggested, Pater is here adapting and expanding Plato's doctrine of Eros and Anteros (in which love inspires a reproduction of love), so as to include the effect of beautiful objects upon their observers, a common intellectual strategy in mid-Victorian Oxford.⁵⁸ Adam Lee has emphasized the fact that Pater's Platonism, as opposed to that of younger contemporaries such as Wilde (and like that of Jowett, cf. 81), foregrounded Plato's distinction in the *Symposium* between the amorous-in-body, who seek to reproduce through children, and the amorous-in-soul, who rather seek to reproduce spiritually by creating beauty. Pater, says Lee, sought in *Gaston* especially to explore the potential for Platonic friendship between those of aesthetic temperament, to build a lasting community through art that could survive mortal death, as dead artists commune with the living through their work.⁵⁹ Johnson engaged with this aspect of Pater's work, which he would almost certainly have read in manuscript after the latter's death (cf. 165), in describing his 'loving-kindness, which cares for the vast world's dead, for the live world's "little ones," for what moves or has moved the affections of men'. Pater, Johnson wrote, 'possessed that loving-kindness in its plenitude'.⁶⁰ Thus, although in *Marius*, as we have seen, Pater seems insistent that such love, in being essentially reproductive, is that proper to chaste marriage and family units, nevertheless he goes on to describe kindly love as also:

⁵⁸ Monsman, 'Platonic Eros', 36-38.

⁵⁹ Lee, 'Platonic Communion', 30.

⁶⁰ Johnson, 'Mr Pater's Humour', 12-13.

consecrated by indefeisible union with the [Godhead], who looks favourably also on the virginity, the restraint which in fact secures the purity, the ardency therefore, of the creative flame (135).

For a few, it seems, there is a potential to engage in this community of love in ways other than marriage and the creation of families, as sexual restraint allows an intensification of love, which can then be communicated non-sexually; through art, perhaps, or artistic friendships. One can deduce from this a conception of a sexually continent artistic life, which through its very continence participates in a social and kindly love.

In this way love, like discipline, comes in *Marius* to constitute both a *telos* and an instance of ‘ethical work’; yet despite the usual erotic implications of love, especially that love characterized by marriage and family, this ‘love’ is also reconciled to a stringent ‘chastity’ and perhaps even, in some cases (most notably, we may conclude, those of an artistic temperament) a more long-term sexual continence.

There is another humane *telos* in *Marius*, one that is perhaps more apparently dear to Pater throughout his writing: health. Health in *Marius*, as in the rest of Pater’s work, is conceived as a balance between the considerations of the body and those of what he variously calls ‘spirit’, ‘mind’, ‘soul’ or ‘intellect’, with sickness or disease generally being traceable to excess in either one of these directions. But in practice this involved the restriction, rather than the indulgence, of the sexual instinct. Marius’s early enthusiasm for the archaic ‘religion of Numa’ is described as an ‘almost morbid religious idealism’, producing an ‘over-tension of soul’ that is only relieved by his ‘healthful love of the country’ and enjoyment of physical exercise therein (vol. 1, 27).

In Rome, the two emperors, Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, illustrate the two poles of unhealthy excess. On first encountering Aurelius, Marius notes:

in the spare body [...] something of asceticism, as we say, of a bodily gymnastic, by which, although it told pleasantly in the clear blue humours of the eye, the flesh had scarcely been an equal gainer with the spirit. It was hardly the expression of 'the healthy mind in the healthy body,' but rather of a sacrifice of the body to the soul, its needs and aspirations (vol. 1, 191).

Aurelius's lack of healthy balance, we are to understand, makes his philosophy an ultimately dissatisfying one. Similar, and yet also opposite, is the carnal sensuality of Lucius Verus, who, though possessed of a 'constitutional freshness of aspect which may defy for a long time extravagant or erring habits of life', is nevertheless 'healthy-looking' rather than actually healthy (vol. 1, 194, 195). It is, after all, Lucius Verus who brings the plague to Rome, 'among other curiosities', from his campaigns 'in the East', that notorious region of sensual luxury (vol. 1, 178).

In contrast to these divergent extremes is presented the 'amiable and healthful spirit' (30) of the sanctuary of Aesculapius, where the body is respected as a way of accessing the soul and *vice versa*. The result of this is a 'freshness' that 'seemed to have something moral in its influence, as if it acted upon the body and the merely bodily powers of apprehension, through the intelligence' (vol. 1, 36). It is from this idea of the action of the body and soul upon each other that Marius acquires a sense of 'the beauty, even for the aesthetic sense, of mere bodily health', a conviction that 'operated afterwards as an influence morally salutary, counteracting the less desirable or hazardous tendencies of some phases of thought, through which he had to pass' (vol. 1, 41): in other words, prevents him from putting an unhealthy interpretation, unbalanced in either direction, upon the Epicurean philosophy that he adapts for his own use. A young priest teaches Marius the importance of being 'temperate', as

quoted above, and one may feel that the monk-like lives of the temple acolytes suggests such temperance to be very near to renunciation and abstention. As in so many nineteenth-century medical accounts of sexuality, what constitutes ‘moderate’ appears to be a rather narrow category. It is also here that he is told that his own temperament is essentially aesthetic, susceptible to the visual: ‘in the eye would lie for him the determining influence of life’ (vol. 1, 32). Through a temperate aestheticism, Marius can work towards developing a ‘healthfully sensuous wisdom’ (vol. 1, 42), an ethic that gives its full scope to the sensuous properties of the body without falling into the ‘corruption’ that is the fate of Flavian and Lucius Verus.

This sense of health as the balance of body and spirit is to be encountered as an ideal throughout Pater’s work. In *Marius* can be seen his fullest exploration of how such health might be achieved, the result perhaps of its appropriateness to the period of late antiquity where such concerns were common, though Pater directs his reader’s attention particularly to the aesthetic temperament. Balance, he suggests, is attained through a constant and careful discipline, very like that advised for the aesthetic temperament in ‘Winckelmann’. This discipline often seems to include a strict sexual limitation, especially for the aesthete, whose natural predisposition towards sensuous pleasure must be actively disciplined if it is to keep within the limits of health.

In the first volume of *Marius* especially Pater is at pains to establish such an economic self-discipline, founded upon physical sensation rather than on its denial, as the primary bequest to humanity of certain kinds of religious ritual; an instinctual attitude answering, like chastity and love, to a human need. Thus he says of the ‘religion of Numa’ that it ‘had tended to maintain’ an attitude of ‘perfect physical sanity’ in young men and women (vol. 1, 4); a state that finds its fullest expression in the young men who carry the gods to the fields, and ‘who were understood to proceed

to this office in perfect temperance, as pure in soul and body as the air they breathed in the firm weather of that early summer-time' (vol. 1, 7). It is the cultivation of this state that Marius most enjoys about the old religion, revelling in 'the abstinence, the strenuous self-control and *ascêsis*, which such preparations involved' (vol. 1, 25).

The word *ascêsis*, meaning discipline or training, is one commonly found in this connection in Pater's work, as F. C. McGrath, among others, has noted.⁶¹ It must not, however, be confused with Foucault's *askesis*, used in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality* to mean all strenuous attention to formation of oneself as an ethical subject. Pater's use of the word is far more limited than McGrath suggests: it refers either to an ideal aesthetic, or the process through which it is achieved. It occurs, perhaps most famously, in the 1888 essay on 'Style', in which Pater describes true artistic style in very much the same terms as the aesthetic life, as an ideal correspondence between inner and outer that sounds very like what he elsewhere calls health. Art, he says, consists of 'the finer accommodation of speech to that vision within' (6), achievable only through a certain artistic discipline, 'a sense of self-restraint and renunciation' that leads, not to repression, but to 'the freedom of a master', who, 'braced only by those restraints [...] is really vindicating his liberty' (10). The artist, in all his glory, is seen 'sustained by yet restraining the productive ardour' (20). A product of this artistic effort is the aesthetic appeal of discipline itself: 'self-restraint, a skilful economy of means, *ascêsis*, that too has a beauty of its own [...] connected always with the delightful sense of difficulty overcome' (14). In this essay particularly Pater betrays a tendency to gender this beautiful discipline,

⁶¹ F. C. McGrath, *The Sensible Spirit: Walter Pater and the Modernist Paradigm* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1986), 215-30. See also James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 176-77; and Michael R. Doylen, *Homosexual Askesis: Representations of Self-Fashioning in the Writings of Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and John Addington Symonds*, unpublished doctoral dissertation (Berkeley: University of California, 1998).

deeming it ‘the male conscience in that matter, as we must think it under a system of education which still to so large an extent limits real scholarship to men’ (8). Though this gendering seems contingent on current cultural conditions, and to contain a note of regret for that present order, yet Pater does elsewhere tend to present it in a more essentialist manner, as Megan Becker-Lackrone has shown.⁶²

This pull of the aesthetic temperament towards the physically sensuous, even to the border at which the sensuous becomes the sensual though is importantly curbed through careful discipline, is found again and again in Pater’s work. We saw earlier how Winckelmann, implied to be a model aesthetic temperament, was said by Pater to draw pleasure and inspiration from relationships with young men; yet he nevertheless obeyed the ‘law of self-culture’ (183), which kept ‘passion always below that degree of intensity at which it must necessarily be transitory’ (172). Perhaps the most emphatic example, however, is Plato, whom Pater describes as intimately concerned with ‘the aesthetic element’ in life (*Plato and Platonism*, 267). In *Plato and Platonism* Pater reads Plato as one who, having been not only of a passionate, but specifically amorous temperament, has nevertheless controlled, and thus intensified and redirected energy otherwise amorous towards the immaterial. He was ‘from first to last, unalterably a lover’ (134), who knew ‘all the ways of lovers, in the literal sense’, being ‘subject to the influence of fair persons’ (136). In this last phrase, importantly, he gives an aesthetic motive to the passion of Plato. Yet this amorous, sensuous passion is fiercely controlled, contained, and redirected from the real to the ideal, in what can be understood as the manner of the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*. He is described as:

⁶² Megan Becker-Lackrone, ‘Same-Sex and the Second Sex in “Style”’, *The Pater Newsletter*, 52 (Spring, 2007), 37-44. See also James Eli Adams, ‘Pater’s Muscular Aestheticism’, in Donald Hall ed., *Muscular Christianity: Embodying the Victorian Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 215-38.

The lover, who is become a lover of the invisible, but still a lover, and therefore, literally, a seer, of it, carrying an elaborate cultivation of the bodily senses, of eye and ear, their natural force and acquired fineness – gifts akin properly to [...] the discipline of sensuous love – into the world of intellectual abstractions (139-40).

Therefore, ‘Austere as he seems, and on well-considered principle really is, his temperance or austerity, aesthetically so winning, is attained only by the chastisement, the control, of a variously interested, a richly sensuous nature’ (126). Such restraint is further described by Pater, in the essay ‘Plato’s Aesthetics’, as the thing that distinguishes art from other modes of experience: it is the element of ‘art itself in the work of art, tenacity of intuition and of consequent purpose, the spirit of construction as opposed to what is hysteric or works at random, the maintenance of a standard’ (281). Again this is gendered, with this gendering explicitly linking the aesthetic to the ethical: ‘manliness and temperance, as we know, were the two characteristic virtues of that old pagan world; and in art certainly they seem to be involved in one another’ (280). This movement from aesthetics to ethics Pater attributes to Plato himself:

And Platonic aesthetics, remember! as such, are ever in close connexion with Plato’s ethics. It is life itself, action and character, he proposes to colour; to get something of that irrepressible conscience of art, that spirit of control, into the general course of life, above all into its energetic and impassioned acts (282).

Read in this context, Marius’s reaction to the story of Cupid and Psyche can be understood as consistent with his admiration of both sensuous health and chaste love. Though it inspires him with a sense of ‘the human body in its beauty, as the highest potency of all the beauty of material objects’, and ‘the ideal of a perfect imaginative

love, centred upon a type of beauty entirely flawless and clean' (vol. 1, 92), nevertheless:

In contrast with that ideal, in all the pure brilliancy, and as it were in the happy light, of youth and morning and the springtide, men's actual loves, with which at many points the book brings one into close contact, might appear to him, like the general tenor of their lives, to be somewhat mean and sordid (vol. 1, 93).

Marius's Epicureanism, as developed in his youth, is said to embrace 'whatever form of human life' might satisfy the criteria of being 'heroic, impassioned, ideal', including 'loves such as those in the exquisite old story of Apuleius' (vol. 1, 152). But a few pages later, shortly before he receives the summons to Rome, we learn that, for Marius himself, this idealism is 'determined in him, not as the longing for love – to be with Cynthia, or Aspasia – but as a thirst for existence in exquisite places' (vol. 1, 157), to experience art and nature. Marius's personal turning away from sensual love is not, we may conclude, a result of his lack of sensuous susceptibility, but rather is a direct consequence of his particular aesthetic temperament. In this he bears a close resemblance to the Hippolytus of 'Hippolytus Veiled' (cf. 4), who as we saw in the Introduction enjoyed close, sensuous communion with the natural world, but spurned the sexual advances of Phaedra. This may be what is meant by the statement that Marius's early religious training, founded as we saw on physical sensation, operates as a salutary influence, keeping him healthy through his Epicurean speculations.

Lapses from Health

T. S. Eliot, in his somewhat disingenuous reading of Pater, complained that he was ‘inclined to emphasize whatever is morbid or associated with physical malady’.⁶³ This judgement contrasts sharply with the above account of Pater’s preoccupation with balanced health; and yet the association of Pater with the unhealthy, the diseased, the morbid, can be found from the early reviews to recent criticism. An interlocutor in Wilde’s dialogue ‘The Critic as Artist’ (1891) says that Pater’s prose is ‘as sweet in our ears as was that flute-player’s music that lent to the lips of La Gioconda those subtle and poisonous curves’, fixing upon this famously purple, but perhaps not entirely typical passage as if it were representative; while a parody Wilde, Esmé Amaranth of *The Green Carnation*, refers to ‘mad scarlet things such as Walter Pater loves’.⁶⁴ And E. F. Benson, in an instalment of his *Lucia* series, has the pretentious Lucia say of Brahms: ‘As Pater says of something else, “the soul with all its maladies” has entered into his music’.⁶⁵ More recently, Murray Pittock has characterized Pater as preoccupied with ‘mortality itself, the vampire hidden in the vision of beauty, the constancy of death wrapped in the flesh of the constancy of passion’, and as ‘a major English influence on the growing obsession with death and decay which marked the end of the century both in Britain and in France’.⁶⁶

Such preoccupation with morbidity has formed the primary connection between Pater and English decadence. Wilde himself, according to Yeats, said of *The*

⁶³ T. S. Eliot, ‘Arnold and Pater’ (first published 1932), in *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 431-43; 439.

⁶⁴ Oscar Wilde, ‘The Critic as Artist’, in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde*, vol. 4, ed. Josephine M. Guy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 124-206, 157; [Robert Hitchen], *The Green Carnation* (London: Heinemann, 1894), 135. It was ‘such as George Meredith loves’ in the first edition, a testament to Pater’s, and Meredith’s, changing popular reputation.

⁶⁵ E. F. Benson, *Lucia’s Progress*, in *Lucia Victrix* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991; first published 1935), 285-519; 343.

⁶⁶ Murray G. H. Pittock, *Spectrum of Decadence: The Literature of the 1890s* (London: Routledge, 1993), 22-23,

Renaissance: 'It is my golden book; I never travel without it; but it is the very flower of decadence: the last trumpet should have sounded the moment it was written'.⁶⁷ Further, Pater's 'decadence' has frequently been assumed to entail a further preoccupation with an active sexual 'perversity', in accordance to that movement's association with sexual transgression. Frank Harris, as quoted in the introduction to this thesis, remembers a friend introducing him to Pater's work as that of 'the apostle of an esoteric cult, the apologist of strange sins. Not knowing then how common this perversion is in England, I was a little startled and tremendously curious'.⁶⁸ Harris eventually concluded that there was little evidence for this 'darker suspicion', and certainly nothing in Pater's writings, but his anecdote bears witness to the ease with which the connection was drawn between Pater's morbidity and his sexuality.⁶⁹ It was perhaps for this reason that those admirers who commonly read Pater as recommending a sexually continent life often strongly objected to the charge of Decadence. 'It is unfair to think of Pater as in sympathy with the decadent school', writes Benson, soon after having complained of those who 'applied the doctrine of beauty to a recklessness of practice which Pater not only condemned, but the contemplation of which both disgusted and appalled him'.⁷⁰ Holbrook Jackson, too, was eager to hold Pater's 'austere philosophy of sensations' aloft from 'those seeking a native sanction for their decadence', whom he accused of giving 'a perverse twist' to Pater's 'aesthetic Puritanism'.⁷¹

Pater's potential decadence need not entail perverse sexuality in this manner, nor his potential continence entail anti-Decadence. Pater's morbidity, his apparent

⁶⁷ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 124.

⁶⁸ Harris, 'Walter Pater', 203.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁷⁰ Benson, *Walter Pater*, 196.

⁷¹ Holbrook Jackson, *The Eighteen Nineties: A Review of Art and Ideas at the Close of the Nineteenth Century* (London: Grant Richards, 1913), 70-71.

fascination with diseases both physical and moral, is not incompatible with a reading of his work that privileges sexual continence. Rather, such continence can be found at the heart of Pater's exploration of the unhealthy, at least for those of an aesthetic temperament. As we have seen, Pater insists always on the widest possible experience as the basis for the ethical life, particularly for the aesthete. It is this anxiety that leads Marius to criticize Christianity, just as he criticized Epicureanism, because he suspects it to be 'exclusive of any admiring gaze upon anything but itself' (vol. 2, 108). This need for widened experience, Pater seems to admit, commonly involves an acceptance, rather than avoidance, of what is unhealthy or unbalanced in life, whether that excess is towards the material or the immaterial; so long as it is acknowledged as such and not allowed, in so far as it is indeed unhealthy, permanently to influence its observer. The Paterian aesthete will, in the course of his personal discipline, cultivate both a habit of selection, of discernment between what is healthy and what is not, and an ability to draw from the unhealthy the beauty that it contains: 'To be able to make his use of the flower, when the fruit perhaps was useless or poisonous'.⁷² Pater stated this explicitly in 'The Aesthetic Life'. Though the modern world, and especially London, are found there to be 'ugly' and 'sordid', the aesthete, 'a consistent disciple of the aesthetic principle', with 'the discernments of a wide education', will proceed 'not always with a painful sense of contrast, but with an eye for touches of a kindred charm even there: a hundred delicate beauties the like of which no one ever valued before'.⁷³ This could not, as an unpublished and unfinished manuscript, have been widely read in Pater's time, but its advocacy of careful discernment and selection from a coarse world is implicit in much else that he wrote.

⁷² Pater, *Marius*, 194.

⁷³ Pater, 'The Aesthetic Life', 14.

This practice of disciplined selection is, of course, easier said than done: as Benson complained, ‘the difficulty in the artistic, as in the ethical scale, is to discern at what point the spirit begins to yield to the lower impulse’.⁷⁴ To the question of how one remains uncorrupted in the face of disease, Pater seems to provide only the rather unsatisfactory answer that the aesthetic temperament contains within it a natural, instinctive temperance. It has ideally a reaction of disgust in the face of sensuous excess: Johnson says of Pater’s philosophy, quoting Pater himself, that ‘In art [...] “the way to perfection lies through a series of disgusts”’, and the same, as so often, could be said of his ethics.⁷⁵ ‘Culture in its most general sense’, Pater says in ‘The Aesthetic Life’, is ‘in large measure negative or renunciant, a fine habit of ignoring or forgetting’.⁷⁶ Likewise, the aesthetic temperament will be kept from excessive spirituality by the natural pleasure it takes in the visual.

Much of Pater’s work can be read as a display of such aesthetic control, of the calm consideration of unhealthy elements in order to give full due to what is worthwhile, and yet separate it from what is unremittingly morbid. There are numerous examples in Pater’s work of aesthetically inclined characters, almost always men, whose personal temperance keeps them ‘healthy’ when in contact with unhealthy things, allowing them to extract only what is beautiful from them and avoid their corrupting influence. Marius is kept healthy in his Epicurean phase and while in contact with the corrupt Flavian, as well as when considering the unhealthily immaterial Stoicism of Marcus Aurelius; Gaston in the rooms of his extravagant friend Jasmine, and in a lecture by Neo-Platonist Giordano Bruno; Hippolytus in the boudoir of Phaedra, and when considering the more potentially deathly aspects of the religion of Artemis. When not tracking the progress of one of these exemplary

⁷⁴ Benson, *Walter Pater*, 47.

⁷⁵ Johnson, ‘The Work of Mr. Pater’ (first published 1894), in *Post Liminium*, 19-42; 36.

⁷⁶ Pater, ‘The Aesthetic Life’, 14.

individuals, Pater describes instances in which the border between temperance and excess is crossed. The *Imaginary Portraits* (1887) all read as explorations of points at which health has been overbalanced. Excessive materiality is explored in the sensually corrupted townspeople of ‘Denys L’Auxerrois’; in the cruelty of Apollo in ‘Apollo in Picardy; and in the turning of Duke Carl towards marriage instead of aesthetic revolution in ‘Duke Carl of Rosemold’, a turn that is punished with almost immediate violent annihilation. The nihilism of the protagonist in ‘Sebastian Van Storck’, on the other hand, provides a complementary portrait of excessive immaterialism, while Watteau in ‘A Prince of Court Painters’ provides an uneasy instance of excess in both directions at once, or of one excess leading to the other in the aesthetic temperament (excessive sensuousness producing a reaction of disgust). All of these excesses are described as lapses in health, but it is characteristic of Pater that they are also often failures in love or sympathy, particularly in the instance of Apollonian cruelty and Dionysian voluptuousness.

This investigation into examples of excess is not limited to the fiction. It is matched by many places in the criticism where Pater deliberately explores points where temperance slips into excess, usually of the immaterial kind, though he occasionally uses the language of excessive carnality to describe this, the result possibly of a general concern to make immaterial things seem material, what Catherine Maxwell calls Pater’s ‘tendency towards embodiment’.⁷⁷ Ascêsis, for example is often admired, but is also criticized when it fails in either health or love, as in *Marius*, where he describes the Christian church as he represents it as being between two periods of ‘austere *ascêsis*’ (vol. 2, 117), with the suggestion that these two periods were less perfect. In *Plato and Platonism*, too, he shows the

⁷⁷ Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 73.

Lacedaemonian citizens, whose ‘acquired asceticism’ (143) otherwise makes them ‘the most beautiful of all people, in Greece, in the world’ (218), as cruelly murdering those of their slaves who appear to be more beautiful than themselves (205). Again, excessive austerity leads to brutality.

But perhaps the most obvious example, and most potentially decadent, is to be found in the early essay ‘Poems by William Morris’, a part of which was reprinted in the first edition of *Appreciations* as ‘Aesthetic Poetry’, though excised from the second edition, and the end of which became the ‘Conclusion’ to *The Renaissance*. Pater finds two different informing spirits in Morris’s poetry: the medieval in *The Defence of Guenevere* (1858), and the Hellenic in *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867). The medieval spirit in question is typified, he writes, by Provençal love poetry, which learns from religion ‘the art of directing towards an imaginary object sentiments whose natural direction is towards objects of sense’. The result of this is ‘a love defined by the absence of the beloved, choosing to be without hope, protesting against all lower uses of love, barren, extravagant, antinomian’. In life as in poetry this produces an unhealthy, though intense, atmosphere:

Here, under this strange complex of conditions, as in some medicated air, exotic flowers of sentiment expand, among people of a remote and unaccustomed beauty, somnambulistic, frail, androgynous, the light almost shining through them, as the flame of a little taper shows through the Host.

The connection to unhealthiness, indicated in the word ‘medicated’, is then made explicit: this religion, and the love that is adapted from it, is ‘but a beautiful disease or disorder of the senses’.⁷⁸ This is disease caused by unbalance, but quite clearly,

⁷⁸ [Walter Pater], ‘Poems by William Morris’, *The Westminster Review*, 34:2 (October, 1868), 300-12; 302. All further references will be given in the text.

despite the sensuous imagery, an unbalance in favour of abstraction, the denial of embodied passion in order to cultivate an intense spiritual experience:

A passion of which the outlets are sealed, begets a tension of nerve, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliance and relief – all redness is turned into blood, all water into tears (303).

Again, the word ‘passion’ here, especially as it is used in relation to love poetry, potentially signifies, or at least includes, sexual passion. Morris’s poetry, Pater finds, refines even on this refinement: ‘It is a finer ideal, extracted from what in relation to any actual world is already an ideal’ (300), though it is not clear that this statement applies just to Morris’s early poetry. In the later verse, Pater finds what will become his familiar conception of Hellenism, which maintains, in opposition to medievalism, an adequate relationship with the truth of bodily experience. ‘Desire here is towards the body of nature for its own sake, not because a soul is divined through it’ (306). This is overtly valued above the medieval spirit, referred to as ‘a better daylight’ (305). This revived Hellenism is also described as an example of ‘one law of the life of the human spirit, and of which what we call the Renaissance is only a supreme instance’ (305).

Sussman finds here a reflection and adaptation of regulatory sexual discourse. He reads a wholehearted but coyly expressed approval into Pater’s description of a retentive (rather than regulative) mechanism, in which retention leads to intensification. ‘His crucial turn’, writes Sussman, ‘is presenting this disruption of the equilibrium of manliness not as a condition to be overcome but as a condition to be desired’.⁷⁹ In his reading of ‘Poems by William Morris’, Sussman does not adequately account for the fact that Pater describes this mechanism in a negative context. But

⁷⁹ Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities*, 178.

evidence can be found in support of his conclusions. In a movement that will also become familiar in later writing, Pater seems to suspect that he has too clearly associated Hellenism with the life of the senses, and too crudely put this sensuous life in opposition to one that has been defined by a lack of sexual activity that could sound very like healthful temperance. Again invoking health, he writes that *Jason* reminds him of:

the loveliness of things newly washed with fresh water; and this clarity and chasteness, mere qualities here of an exquisite art, remind one that the effectual preserver of all purity is perfect taste.

It is difficult, within the context of the essay, to understand how this Hellenic spirit can be both healthy and chaste. Is not ‘chasteness’ and ‘purity’ a kind of damming up, a ‘passion, of which the outlets are sealed’? This momentary confusion is heightened by his use of the word ‘medicinal’ to describe the poem, reminiscent of the recent use of the phrase ‘medicated air’ in a negative context (309). And though he does connect this previously described spirit to that which is fleeting and decays – ‘such loves were too fragile and adventurous to last more than for a moment’ – yet it would be difficult in reading, at the end of the essay, the early version of the text that was to become the ‘Conclusion’, not to feel that the urge to ‘intensity’, to a gathering of ‘moments as they pass’, sounds far more fitted to that medieval spirit than the Hellenic one that he seems to recommend (302). Read within the context of Pater’s wider work, however, it is possible to see him making a distinction here between two kinds of continence: one that gives full consideration to the bodily, and one that does not. Unhealthy continence has, he may be imagined saying, its aesthetic attractions, its own strange beauty. But it is to the embodied Hellenic chastity that he would return again and again when considering the movement from aesthetics to ethics.

As in the *Imaginary Portraits*, Pater's own highly controlled critical prose can be interpreted as an example of aesthetic discipline, allowing the aesthetic exploration of, and even enjoyment of, disease. Pater himself is certainly represented as an aesthetic temperament in his own terms by Greenslet, who reports that 'Pater was a man of adventurous mental temperament, and in those long, leisurely years at Oxford he voyaged through strange, and sometimes perilous, seas of thought', through which he was protected by a temperament 'precise and austere'.⁸⁰ It has been common to read Pater's lingering over elements of disease in these tales particularly, especially in those in which that disease is an excessive sensuality, as an erotic approval either unconsciously repressed or intentionally coded.⁸¹ The relative merits of these different readings depend, not on their fidelity or otherwise to the texts themselves, but rather on the different understandings of sexuality that inform them. This chapter has argued that the sexual model underpinning the reading outlined in this chapter can be found throughout Pater's work, and was shared by many contemporary readers. The following chapters will trace its influence on three late nineteenth-century Aesthetic writers.

⁸⁰ Greenslet, *Walter Pater*, 39, 30.

⁸¹ For example, see Dellamora, *Masculine Desire*, 180-92; Laurel Brake, 'The Entangling Dance: Pater After Marius, 1885-1891', in Brake *et al.* eds, *Transparencies of Desire*, 24-36; Kenneth Daley, 'Pater's Auxerre Tapestry', in *Victorian Aesthetic Conditions: Pater Across the Arts*, eds Laurel Brake and Elicia Clements (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 85-101.

Chapter Three

‘A Holy Indifference and Tolerant Favour’: Lionel Johnson

Since his sudden death in 1902, most of the scholarly attention directed toward the 1890s poet and critic Lionel Johnson has been biographical. While his two volumes of poetry (*Poems*, 1895, and *Ireland, and Other Poems*, 1897), one of criticism (*The Art of Thomas Hardy*, 1894), and large quantity of critical journalism (selections published as *Post Liminium*, 1912, and *Reviews and Critical Papers*, 1921) have attracted a small but steady number of enthusiastic readers, his life has found a firm place in 1890s mythology. Learned and saintly, outwardly resembling a boy of 15, and yet sitting up all night drinking, first with friends and then alone until it apparently killed him, Lionel Johnson loomed large in the memories of those who, in the first half of the twentieth century, sought to define the peculiar character of that decade.

In particular they strained to account for the suddenness of Johnson's death. At the age of 35 he collapsed in a public house, and died without regaining consciousness four days later. Critics have searched through Johnson's biography for the repression that could, at least figuratively, account for the double outbreak; first of habitual drunkenness and then of the multiple sudden haemorrhages in the brain of a relatively young man of letters.¹ They did not have far to look. Johnson's life and

¹ Though clearly a heavy drinker, Johnson's post-mortem report (London, St Bartholomew's Hospital Archives, MS SBHB/PA/4/29/f.238-9) does not show enough liver damage to account persuasively for the scale of brain haemorrhaging that he suffered. Rather, his reports of long, severe bouts of gout in the last few years of his life suggest that an excess of uric acid, combined with the drinking, made him susceptible to stroke. Both his father and his father's brother had died of what was then called 'gout reaching the heart' (see letter from Lionel Johnson to Oswald Carnagy Johnson, 30 September 1891, Dubuque IA, Loras College Library, *Rosliep Personal Papers*, Filing Cabinet A, Drawer 1, Folder 2, letter 9). My thanks to Dr Andrew Schuman for his contribution of medical knowledge to the interpretation of this history. For further details concerning the events of Johnson's death, see Richard Whittington-Egan, *Lionel Johnson: Victorian Dark Angel* (Malvern: Capella Archives, 2012), 285-95.

work contained a persistent idealization of sexual continence that could only, in post-Freudian logic, lead to an inevitable return of the repressed, all the more virulent for its long containment. Yeats said of Johnson ‘now that I know his end, I see him creating, to use a favourite adjective of his, “marmorean” verse, and believing in the most terrible doctrines to keep down his own turbulence’. Yeats used Johnson’s celibate alcoholism, painted somewhat luridly, to illustrate his narrative of a ‘tragic generation’ that suffered from an excess of unworldly idealism, a crying for the moon that led to a reaction of destructive debauchery: ‘What portion in the world can the artist have / Who has awakened from the common dream / But dissipation and despair?’² With Yeats, Johnson’s biography ceased to be a personal matter, and became inextricably tied to the twentieth- and twenty-first-century effort to understand the cultural history of the near past.

Modern criticism has remained equally interested in the problem presented by Johnson’s life and death, and has continued to see in it an emblem of 1890s decadence generally. His work has almost always been read as a direct expression of his conflicted personality, his suppressed ‘turbulence’. Since the 1960s this turbulence has normally been understood as repressed homosexuality. Ian Fletcher, editor of the collected poems, wrote that Johnson was ‘a type [...] symbolic of his time’, and his poetry ‘normative of the extremes in the moral sensibility of the decade’.³ Holly Laird has called for readings of Johnson’s poetry as poetry rather than veiled biography or mythological symbol; and yet, despite generally repudiating the critical habit of crediting 1890s mythology, even she states (erroneously) that ‘almost all of the early

² W. B. Yeats, *Collected Works*, general eds Richard J. Finneran and George Mills Harper, vol. 3: *Autobiographies*, eds William H. O’Donnell and Douglas N. Archibald (New York: Scribner, 1999; this section first published 1922), 185, 241.

³ Ian Fletcher, ‘Introduction’, in *The Collected Poems of Lionel Johnson*, ed. Ian Fletcher, 2nd ed. (London: Garland, 1982), xv-lxxvi; xvi.

legends in Johnson's case have been recuperated as facts', citing particularly his homosexuality and the part it supposedly played in his alcoholism and reclusion.⁴

There is something temptingly appropriate in this continued muddling of the life and work of a man who himself saw no essential division between the two. As with Pater and so many of his contemporaries, a great deal of Johnson's literary output either directly or implicitly deals with the aesthetic life; 'an artist', he wrote, 'is forbidden, by the facts of his natural structure, to dissociate his ethics from his aesthetics'.⁵ But the imposition of a post-Freudian sexual logic onto the relationship between Johnson's life and work has veiled the theoretical engagement of that work with the question of sexuality in this aesthetic life. Johnson represented the artist or aesthete as ideally continent, and found in this configuration a plausible solution to both the individual and communal problems that such a life presents. For the individual, he finds sexual continence to be a productive state, in which retention causes not repression but intensification, while he also considers it to be a state of disinterestedness conducive to sociability.

Where Johnson, who converted to Roman Catholicism in 1891, differs from Pater is in the consistency with which he uses sexual continence as an arena for the reconciliation of religious and secular culture. Johnson's thinking was profoundly influenced by the many Victorian attempts to effect this reconciliation, particularly that of the Tractarians and Matthew Arnold. But perhaps more than anyone else, Johnson attempted to find a cultural humanism that gave full consideration to both nineteenth-century Aestheticism and Catholic theology. He did this through a re-Christianized Paterianism to which sexual continence was central. This chapter

⁴ Holly Laird, 'The Death of the Author by Suicide: Fin-de-Siècle Poets and the Construction of Identity', in Joseph Bristow ed., *The Fin-de-Siècle Poem: English Literary Culture and the 1890s* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005), 69-100; 85, 74.

⁵ Lionel Johnson, *The Art of Thomas Hardy* (London: Elkin Mathews & John Lane, 1894), 225. All further references will be given in the text.

examines the place of productive sexual continence in Johnson's work, and will consider the extent to which it can be read as part of a coherent Paterian heritage. The first section looks at Johnson's early letters, and the way in which he drew together a wide range of disparate influences, and experimented with the synthesis of this material into an ethic both individually and socially plausible. The second shows how Pater was integrated into this process, and shaped it as Johnson matured. The third finds in his poetry the outlining of an individual ethic that is both religious and artistic, while the fourth sees this extended into a theory of sociability, in which Paterian Platonism is reconciled to the Catholic convention of priestly indifference.

The Winchester Letters

In 1919, seventeen years after Johnson's untimely death, *Some Winchester Letters of Lionel Johnson* was published anonymously. The editor was Frank Russell, brother of Bertrand and schoolfellow and lifelong friend to Johnson. An air of scandal surrounded the publication; the book was soon withdrawn when the Johnson family threatened legal action. The 'family' by this time consisted entirely of Johnson's sister Isabella, a devout high Anglican (Johnson refers to her as his 'conventual sister') who as likely objected to her brother's flirtations with different religious systems as to, as has been suggested, those with his correspondents.⁶ Written while still a schoolboy at Winchester College to friends mostly at Oxford, the letters as edited were addressed simply to A, B, and C, identifiable as Russell, Charles Sayle, and John Badley respectively. The transcriptions certainly contain, in Murray Pittock's words,

⁶ Letter to Campbell Dodgson, 15 April 1889, in *Some Letters of Lionel Johnson*, ed. Raymond Roseliep, unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of Notre Dame, Indiana, 1953), 80.

‘extensive bowdlerization’;⁷ but only to conceal references to Russell’s rustication from Oxford for ‘immoral conduct’, when indiscrete letters, probably from Sayle to another boy, had been found in his room and Russell, though apparently not sympathizing with his friend’s sexual tastes, nevertheless refused to betray him.⁸

Johnson’s letters contain his first efforts towards the formation of an ethic that would combine an intense individual experience with sociability and social responsibility. They contain a remarkable range of reference and level of articulation, though in tandem with a seventeen-year-old’s experiments with self-representation. They take a broad selection of nineteenth-century philosophical and religious systems, and go through several stages of synthesizing these into a workable ethic. To Russell he describes their position as that of ‘two of young England’s rising generation in search of a creed’.⁹ This search, for Johnson, requires the balancing of various claims, the achievement of which process he variously describes as ‘light’, ‘love’ or ‘warmth’. His letters express two focal conflicts. The most overt is between one’s duty to oneself as individual, and towards the community outside of which happiness is impossible. On the one hand, Johnson needs a personally satisfying individual spiritual experience requiring isolation and focus on the self, while on the other hand he is painfully aware that no spiritual system can be ultimately satisfying that cannot potentially be extended to all, or at least integrate the isolated individual within some wider system of common good. Johnson in these letters is far more interested than Pater in the good of the community for its own sake, rather than in its capacity for

⁷ Murray Pittock, ‘Introduction’, in Lionel Johnson, *Selected Letters*, ed. Murray Pittock (Edinburgh: Tragona Press, 1988), 5-7; 6.

⁸ This is revealed by the originals of the Johnson-Russell branch of the correspondence, in *Roseliap Personal Papers*, Cabinet A, Drawer 1, Folders 3-7; and by the originals of the Johnson-Sayle branch, Cambridge, University Library, *Charles Edward Sayle: Diaries and Papers*, Letters from Lionel Johnson to Charles Sayle, GBR/0012/MS Add. 8548.

⁹ *Some Winchester Letters of Lionel Johnson*, ed. [Frank Russell] (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1919), 23. All further references will be given in the text.

contributing to the richness of the aesthetic life; it is more likely at this stage that Johnson is influenced by Arnold and Newman than by Pater. Sexuality plays a large part in these vacillations, although not initially in the way that might be expected at a time when sexuality was so often associated with the personal and selfish. Johnson most frequently associates sexual continence with the ideal isolation of the individual, and active sexuality with the community into which he must integrate. He assumes, rather than interrogates, the obvious desirability of sexual continence, though of course he acknowledges its role in the perpetuation of any society.

The second conflict is between the religious element he requires – a satisfactory ‘creed’ for him must allow worship of a transcendental being or ideal – and the secular culture he admires. This has been recognized by Murray Pittock as a central tension in Johnson’s work: ‘conflict [...] arises from a wish both to elevate the role of the artist and at the same time remain conscious of his own faith and its demands’. Pittock uses this supposed conflict to explain Johnson’s alcoholism. ‘Hence his asceticism and his passion’, he says, ‘the drink beside his bed, the Mass an unsteady walk away’. And this conflicted personality is then used once again to set Johnson up as a symbol of his period: ‘Johnson is thus the decadent simultaneously participating in and sitting in judgement on his own values’.¹⁰ Pittock supposes that Aestheticism and religion are innately at odds, and thus does not adequately allow for the possibility that an idiosyncratic yet effective reconciliation *could* be achieved, via what Mark Knight and Emma Mason call the ‘capacity of the Christian faith for renewal, reform, and even revolution’.¹¹ Indeed, such reconciliation had been effected

¹⁰ Murray Pittock, ‘The Poetry of Lionel Johnson’, *Victorian Poetry*, 28:3/4 (Autumn/Winter, 1990), 43–60; 43, 47.

¹¹ Mark Knight and Emma Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 9.

by members of the Oxford Movement, many of whom regarded an ideal of aesthetic beauty as crucial to their spirituality (cf. 89).¹²

The ‘Winchester letters’ begin in 1883 with Russell’s introduction of his younger friend to Buddhism. Johnson almost immediately tests Buddhism against the above criteria. At first (and in hindsight ironically) he writes, ‘it repels me, chills me. I would rather be a Roman Catholic [...], it has not enough warmth and light and love to satisfy me’ (19, 20). But he is soon seduced by the personal intensity of Buddhist spirituality, writing of a book lent to him by Russell: ‘I have been hardly just towards Buddhism! the chapter on Nirvana is too transcendently grand not to be a real true ideal’ (21). He particularly values Buddhism as a personal ethic, a system that, like Pater’s aestheticism, guides and beautifies all aspects of life:

Its special nobility seems to me to be this: that whereas orthodox Christians can go on in a slipshod way, trusting to deathbed repentance and priestly absolution, in Buddhism [...] every act is a cause: every step in life, every thought and word and deed is of the utmost importance. This strikes me as the supreme height of moral grandeur (31).

His social conscience, however, is troubled. He asks, ‘But is it at all practical?’ He finds it a creed that is, to him, personally satisfying – ‘were I alone in the world such a life of abnegation and purity and absorption of self into deity would be the ideal for me’ – but without an adequate communal provision: ‘think of the people you meet every day, and then of that system!’ (19):

I admit that for those for whom it is possible it is the supremest ideal: but is it not rather hard upon everyday people that they are placed by no fault of their own in situations in which this striving after the high state of spirituality would be impossible? (21).

¹² *Ibid.*, 89.

Pater does not often worry so explicitly about the wider practical application of his ethic.

Johnson's anxiety about the social potential of Buddhism is manifest also in worry about its sexual dimension. 'Do Buddhists practice celibacy?' he asks, continuing, 'if so, it entails difficulties, and confirms what I said as to the impossibility of the religion of Buddha ever really spreading' (22). He is informed that they do, and is greatly perturbed, though not because he personally dislikes the idea. Celibacy prevents Buddhism from being a universal creed because the perpetuation of the human race requires that ideal to be unachieved, and Johnson will have nothing to do with a creed from which even a small section of humanity is necessarily excluded. His qualms on this point, however, are soothed when he learns of reincarnation. 'The successive incarnations we undergo is perhaps meant to explain the apparent injustice I supposed with regard to the entire purity enjoined on us' (29). Reincarnation allows everyone to reach the state of perfection to which celibacy is necessary, though not all at the same time, as each life is reincarnated into a higher form; one might marry in this life, and remain celibate in the next. Throughout this discussion, the innate value of celibacy above marriage is taken for granted, and only its practicality questioned.

In what would become a familiar pattern, Johnson rejoices at finding a system that will allow isolated, intensely spiritual sexual continence for the few, but also their integration into what he calls the 'universal brotherhood' (17). And also in typical Johnsonian fashion, he begins reconciling this system to others that have pleased him. 'I think Christ must have meant this by his teaching, which is almost the same as Buddha's. The Gospel of Buddha and Christ does teach a universal love, a tender sympathy for all men' (26). He even finds in Platonism the Buddhist progression from

earthly/sexual to spiritual/celibate: '[Plato] describes exactly the upward spiral process of the worlds' (32). Finally, he extends the Buddhist ideal as a possibility for all people, whether or not they agree with Buddhism itself, in an intellectual move that he would later repeat for Catholicism. 'I certainly hold that many people are unconscious Buddhists, who would reject with laughter the definite dogmas of Esoteric Buddhism' (43).

Johnson did not become a Buddhist, though his experiments with it led not only to his family banning correspondence with Russell as 'a most deadly influence', but also his being accused of setting a bad example to the school: 'the Winchester people both pointed at my influence being pernicious, from a religious point of view, to the school, and suggested that if I did not get clear of these ideas and habits of solitude, I should have to leave; it may come to that, but I can't say'.¹³ His sense of the conflicting values of personal spirituality and humane community, no doubt increased by this show of general disapproval for his excessive individualism, remained throughout the letters, as did his ambition to reconcile them. He doubts the attainability of absolute truth as a basis for living – 'I have come more or less to the conclusion that there is no absolute, universal Truth – that each of us has to struggle on, and make his Truth for himself' (23) – and resolves to settle for a kind of cultural humanism. 'In the meantime, what Matthew Arnold calls "morality" and "conduct" will be a half guide' (24). Increasingly this sounds like the adoption of art as a guiding ideal, and provides the basis for his later Paterianism. He becomes more and more interested in Aestheticism, and writes to Sayle, 'I feel, as all must feel who believe in spirituality, an intense love of beauty in all its forms: I realize to myself an infinity of

¹³ Letter to Frank Russell, 30 December 1883, in *Roseliep Personal Papers*, Trunk 2, Folder 7.

love in listening to true music, in seeing true paintings, reading true poetry'. But again, he worries about excessive individualism:

but, in the midst of all this delight, I feel an impatient longing to crash discords into the music, to burn and destroy the poetry and painting with their memories, to be up and doing or suffering; the kind of state which goads men into the cloister or the gaming hell. Egoism, mere egoism, to waste your time in ravings: but I can't help it or myself (55).

This Carlylean desire to 'be up and doing' runs counter to the critical commonplace that stresses Johnson's contemptuous withdrawal from the world, a notion begun by Yeats and brought to scholarship by Barbara Charlesworth, for whom such withdrawal typifies the period.¹⁴ But it is entirely in accord with Johnson's subsequent life, with his involvement with Christian Socialist projects at school and university, his teaching at 'a sort of Catholic Toynbee Hall' in London, and lecturing in the Irish cause in both London and Ireland.¹⁵

The letters go through several phases in their efforts to integrate personal spirituality with social values. He quotes approvingly Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 'what's the best thing in the world? Something out of it, I think', only to agonize again over the isolation and exclusivity this implies: 'but how can I get the "something" into the world? I can get myself out, but I can't take my brothers' (68). There is a sexual element to his thinking here, as he worries about his moral squeamishness compared to his peers' tendency to discuss sex freely. In November 1883 he asks Russell to send him a copy of a paper entitled *Purity* by George Ridding, headmaster of Winchester (33). As a member of College (his 'house' at Winchester) Johnson was taught by Ridding, and seemed to consider him something of a mentor, reporting personal discussions with him on topics such as religion and happiness.

¹⁴ Barbara Charlesworth, *Dark Passages: The Decadent Consciousness in Victorian Literature* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), 95.

¹⁵ Letter to Campbell Dodgson, December 1891, in Rosalie, *Some Letters*, 117.

When Ridding left Winchester in 1884, Johnson complained: ‘Ridding’s leaving is an inconsolable grief to me: he is the only person here who (I am not speaking conceitedly) understands me at all’ (61). Ridding’s *Purity* argues that ‘Purity is, after all, true to nature; and to the great majority it is an element not of conventional restraint, but of general comfort and happiness’; in other words, a question not only of morality, but also of health. He continues that ‘premature waste of vital force is profligate bankruptcy for maturity’, and ‘intemperance has not more victims of extreme excess in gaols and asylums than unchastity; nor has it ruined more careers of promise in public and intellectual life’. We can recognise here the repetition of the medicalized sexual discourse that so often in the period produced an ideal of productive continence.¹⁶ Johnson, while to all appearances accepting Ridding’s view on sexuality, struggled to reconcile what he knew about the sexuality of his peers with his desire for ‘brotherhood’. Following Ridding’s departure from Winchester, the problem of other people’s sensuality looms large, and is combated through a theory of personal detachment and disinterestedness. He remembers telling Ridding of what he calls ‘God’s convictions’ in himself, consisting in a reluctance to judge others. ‘He told me’, he writes, ‘that he did not expect me [...] to keep myself (from my own point of view) unspotted from the world, and to have any friends in the world’ (77).

This conversation suggests that Johnson’s purported disbelief in sin at this point did not extend to himself. He elaborates this theory, ‘a gospel of toleration, a proclamation of no sin’ (104), by combining priestly and Decadent poses. ‘After reading *Thomas à Kempis*’, he writes, ‘I can listen with no disgust to sensual conversation: I can return freely to walk over the downs’ (76, Johnson’s italics). Johnson is likely drawing here on the sixteenth chapter of the first book of *The*

¹⁶ George Ridding, *Purity* (Derby: Bemrose & Sons, 1883), 4, 8.

Imitation of Christ, entitled ‘On Bearing other Men’s Infirmities and Faults’, which advises ‘Such things as a man may not amend in himself and in others he ought to suffer patiently’, and ‘thou oughtest for such impediments to pray meekly to God that he vouchsafe to help thee that thou mayest suffer benignly’.¹⁷ Johnson makes out of this a strategy of immunity from unhealthy influence similar to that attributed by Pater to the aesthete, and indeed he combines it with a decadent amorality. He writes to an outraged Sayle, ‘I do not love sensuality: I do not hate it; I do not love purity; I do not hate it; I regard both as artistic aspects of life’ (76). Eventually he is obliged to placate the morally earnest Sayle, whom he evidently enjoyed provoking, by tempering this amorality again into Thomas à Kempis’s calm, tolerant comradeship: ‘I do not say to the drunkard “drink if you will, I don’t know why you drink: I won’t presume to dictate: I love you,” but “Brother, can I help you?”’ (137). He also defines his aestheticism in far less decadent terms:

By the way, I protest against your petty denunciation of ‘aestheticism’: in the vulgar sense I mostly agree with you: but so far as it means the gospel of emotion waking as an artistic morality it is a high hope for mankind: true, never eat lotus, lotus is poison, and, in truth, an insidious and unknown one (87).

A separate letter to Edgar Jepson, published by Ian Fletcher and dated by him to this time, elaborates the Decadent pose even further, but ends again by weaving it into a theory of personal withdrawal and disinterestedness, in which unpleasant sensations are regarded critically and aesthetically rather than directly and painfully experienced. Channelling Baudelaire through a decadent variety of Paterianism, quite unlike that which he would later express (and that explored in the previous chapter), but popular

¹⁷ Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, trans. William Atkynson [books 1-3] and Princess Margaret, Countess of Richmond [book 4] (London: Dent, 1910, reprinted 1937; this translation first published by Wynkyn de Worde, 1504; first Latin printing 1471), book 1, chapter 16, 27-28; 27.

in Jepson's Oxford, he writes, 'the flowers of evil are more beautiful than the sensitive plants of purity – and tears and protestations have an ugliness about them', and 'exquisite emotions and desires and pangs – these are the spirit of the best life possible'.¹⁸ It soon becomes clear that Johnson believes himself immune from corruption when exposed to such 'flowers of evil': 'this refinement in beautiful evil, this scrupulous precision of choice, precludes all really insane and unhealthy infection. My theory and practice have the merit of utility: they do not lead me into harsh situations and practice'.¹⁹ Further, the primary 'evil' he is concerned with is not sensuality, but loneliness. 'Convert Despair into an observant tolerance', he counsels, 'and you find yourself sufficient for all your desires'. Finally, he advises Jepson to practise this disinterested withdrawal as a process of transformation that sounds, in its logic of gain from restraint, very like Pater's productive retention: 'a complacent power of spiritual alchemy, whereby the dross of vulgar life is transmuted to the subjects of cultured experiment'.²⁰ A similar flirtation with decadent diabolism that nevertheless subsides into personal withdrawal can be found in Johnson's letters to his cousin Oswald of the same time, where the pose gives way to the claim that 'Holy Innocents, such as I, are privileged persons'.²¹

There are two other lines of argument in these letters that importantly foreshadow his later work: his determination to be a priest, and his profession of belief in a cultural sainthood. In one of the first letters he had declared that 'I should like to turn out a kind of Matthew Arnold in a more professedly "religious" way; i.e., combine the position of a man of letters with that of a quasi-religious lecturer' (16). In May 1884 he declares very suddenly, 'I will be a priest of the Church of England, as I

¹⁸ Lionel Johnson, *A Letter to Edgar Jepson*, ed. Ian Fletcher (Norfolk: Daedalus Press, 1979), 7.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

²¹ Letters to Oswald Carnegie Johnson, *Roseliep Personal Papers*, letters 14, 12, 14, 16 (all undated).

have so often dreamed of being' (85). When Pater says that Marius is 'something of a priest', it is to personal discipline and devotion that he refers, 'that devotion of his days to the contemplation of what is beautiful, a sort of perpetual religious service'.²² Johnson, however, sees the position of priest as a convenient compromise between this and social duty. 'I do long with all the energies of hope to be an influence' (85) he says, seeing opportunity for this in the Church; 'only think of the chances which the priesthood offers: the countless influences of the pulpit and the altar, all potent against the devil in even feeble hands' (86). But his ideal of priesthood, while centred around contribution to the world, a determination to 'make men who are immoral, trivial, careless, believe that the world is holy by their human presence, that love is the great leveller' (138), is nevertheless physically detached: 'I won't have a parish, but try and get the loaves and fishes by literature. I will be all things to a few men' (92). Like John Keble, he imagines taking the world by storm from a rural curacy, though the idea of preaching to the few rather than the many is also reminiscent of Newman. And again, this religious position blends into an aesthetic one; at one point he directly compares the role of critic to that of the priest, writing that 'when I absorb the soul and love of a picture, I worship: when I bring another to it, I have done the priest's office' (136). In this exploration of priestly influence in detachment, he finds a compromise between continent individualism and social duty that begins to sound similar to the Catholic doctrine of priestly indifference.

Over and again in the letters Johnson comes back to the idea of a community of like minds, both dead and alive, encompassing both religious and secular figures, and accessible to all through literature:

²² Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: His Sensations and Ideas*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1910; first published 1885), vol. 2, 17.

I think you hardly realize the intense reality to some minds of the Spirit. [...] I do prosaically believe in it, as I do in the electric force. But then – Christ lives! lo, he is alive for evermore [...] and Shelley is with him, and Plato, and Dante hand in hand with Beatrice: they are Spirits: with identity of love and goodness: not themselves, but each his brother! (97).

These ‘spirits, numberless, aureoled with love, garmented with compassion, scientifically exact’ are represented not as metaphors, but as reality: ‘Why do you persist’, he writes to Sayle, ‘in thinking of these things as mere fantasies, beautiful imaginings? I tell you, they are actualities’ (99). It is not long before they are resolved into a kind of angelic hierarchy, made up, on one level, of earthly priests like himself, and on the other by those deceased who have embodied its spiritual/humane ideal. Earlier he had regretted that ‘Comte’s hierarchy of noble men is so grand a conception, but such a petrification of the truth’ (56). He now bids Sayle:

Compare my hierarchy with Comte’s. What do you think of a few souls, elect, precious, mere memories and records beside my spiritual spheres filled with all dead things, where Christ and Cicero and tortured animals are together glorified: all equal in glory and majesty? (101).

The reference to Comte shows Johnson’s awareness that he is but modifying a common tendency towards hierarchical systems in modern thought. He could just as well have written Newman, Arnold or, though he did not know it yet, Pater, among others. In common with these three, though with some juvenile excess (the inclusion, for example, of ‘tortured animals’, a reference to his disapproval of vivisection), he appears to be attempting to reconcile the virtues of religion and ‘culture’. It was a theory that he was to expand and refine, rather than reject, on conversion to Roman Catholicism with its Communion of Saints, as this later passage suggests:

My Catholic Saints and seraphs [...], Browning, Blake, Swinburne, Rossetti, Hugo, Whitman, Pater, Catullus, Chopin, and so many more: all pass through the world with holy indifference and tolerant favour on their lips, the sun of Righteousness in their eyes, for the healing of the nations (190-91).

The phrase ‘holy indifference and tolerant favour’ is particularly noteworthy; its combination of warmth and separation would come to epitomize much of what Johnson valued.

Pater

From the very beginning of his intellectual career, then, Johnson was exercised by the conflict between individuality and community, as well as by an impulse to reconcile religious and secular influences. Sex played a large part in his thinking on these themes as, having accepted his desire for an isolated celibacy, he sought a way in which to integrate this with both his social conscience and equal desire for companionship. The poems, letters, and criticism of Johnson’s Oxford and London periods continue these preoccupations.

The *Winchester Letters* also express a further struggle, not unrelated, between the pleasures of sense experience and the pleasures of spirituality. In an 1883 letter to Russell he writes:

I have always been trying to find a philosophy of soul and sense which should unite the two, the result always being the subjection of the former: now, of course, I see how utterly mistaken I was, and how infinitely harder I have made it to break the ties of the latter and free my spirit altogether (46).

That dates from the Buddhist days, but later he continues to be occupied by this conundrum, especially as his claims not to believe in any moral standard bring

charges of potential sensuality from his recipients. At first he is willing to admit some truth in this conclusion, writing, 'sensuality: what is it unless the expression of the *mind* instead of the *spirit*? [...] it leads to ruin of body and grossness of spirit: alas, yes! but not till Morality has spurned it and trampled on it' (81-82). Later he seems inclined to introduce a Paterian separation between sensuality and sensuousness, referring to 'sensuality or rather vulgar indifference to the spirit of the senses' (134). 'Beauty', he says, 'means the fusion of spirit and sense' (130).

On his eighteenth birthday Johnson read *Marius the Epicurean*, recently published. He wrote to Russell on that day, 'I am revelling in Pater's book: full of the most perfect literary quality, and infinitely wise and true and beautiful' (180). Though his Decadent pose incorporated Paterian vocabulary, this is the first mention of Pater in his letters. A month later, he refers to 'the perfection of beautiful literature, Pater's *Marius*: a revelation of wonderful beauty and delight: a book to love and worship: a good book' (183). This is the beginning of a very different Paterianism from that aped in the letter to Jepson. Johnson's time at Oxford corresponded with Pater's move to London, but he nevertheless made his acquaintance, possibly through their mutual friend Arthur Galton.²³ His university letters, to his cousin and to his friend Campbell Dodgson, contain many references to time spent with Pater and his sisters in London. To Dodgson in 1889 he writes: 'I lunched with Pater, dined with Pater, smoked with Pater, walked with Pater, went to Mass with Pater, and fell in love with Pater'.²⁴ By 1891, by which time Johnson was also living in London, his letters suggest almost intimate terms, and possibly a sharing of drafts of the unfinished *Gaston de Latour*. 'Pater, I see frequently: he is bringing Gaston to a conclusion. It is marvellous!'²⁵ On Pater's death in 1894, Johnson appears to have been involved in the organizing of his

²³ See Thomas Wright, *The Life of Walter Pater*, 2 vols (London: Everett & Co., 1907) vol. 2, 154.

²⁴ Letter to Campbell Dodgson, 15 April 1889, in Roseliep, *Some Letters*, 80.

²⁵ Letter to Campbell Dodgson, 5 February 1891, *ibid.*, 109.

papers. He writes: 'I have been at Oxford, going through the whole of Pater's manuscripts: a wonderful experience and [privilege]'.²⁶

In his published studies of Pater, Johnson combines the 'fusion of spirit and sense' with his earlier preoccupations, emphasizing always the centrality of this fusion to Pater's aestheticism. 'A perpetual wondering joy in the messages brought by beautiful things, through their visible forms', he claims, 'was a kind of worship to him'.²⁷ As we saw in the previous chapter, he was eager to defend this aspect of Pater's work against those who portrayed him as 'stiff and stately in his jewelled vestments'.²⁸ But he is careful also to distinguish this sensuousness from the sensuality as which it was also widely read. 'It is possible', he says,

that to his congenital distaste for what has no colour, form, warmth, play of life, is due a certain misconstruction of his "philosophy" [...]. Assuredly, Mr. Pater held the power of recognising and of loving beauty in the world to be a possession past praise, and a passionate constancy of concern for it to be no mean state of mind; but assuredly in no ignoble way.²⁹

The misconception warded off in this final clause is clarified in a letter to Dodgson a month after Pater's death. Claiming that 'Pater was perceptibly more gentle and retiring and serious, in a semi-monastic sort of spirit, for the last two or three years', Johnson continues:

Not that he ever came to the point of undervaluing 'culture': but that everlasting Greek delusion, of the Symonds sort, certainly attracted him less, and a kind of religiousness, Catholic Puritanism, more.³⁰

²⁶ Letter to William Butler Yeats, 23 October 1894, *ibid.*, 154. Brackets indicate text judged illegible by Roseliep, and his guess as to the intended meaning.

²⁷ Lionel Johnson, 'The Work of Mr. Pater' (first published 1894), in *Post Liminium: Essays and Critical Papers*, ed. Thomas Whittmore (London: Elkin Mathews, 1912), 19-42; 34.

²⁸ Johnson, 'Mr Pater's Humour' (first published 1897), in *Post Liminium*, 11-19; 11.

²⁹ Johnson, 'The Work of Mr. Pater', 28-29.

³⁰ Letter to Campbell Dodgson, 12 September 1894, in Roseliep *Some Letters*, 150.

This is not a claim that Pater had consciously returned to the Church before his death, but rather that its spirit attracted him, a speculation more than borne out, as Lesley Higgins has shown, by Pater's incomplete manuscript 'Art and Religion'.³¹ The 'Greek delusion' may refer to a general idealization of Greek culture; and yet Johnson's specific reference to John Addington Symonds – whose *A Problem in Greek Ethics*, an account of homosexuality in Greek culture, had been privately printed and circulated in Oxford in 1883, and whose own homosexual inclination was an open secret – surely concedes that Pater may have been attracted, at least earlier in life, to the idea that romantic, potentially sexual relationships between men and boys was either permissible or ennobling. It was a 'delusion' that Johnson was at least familiar with from his Oxford days, when he experimented in manuscript with many sexual representations. His letters of this time to Oswald detail flirtations with older men, an affair with a dancer or actress at the Alhambra whom he calls 'Aspasia', and time spent with 'Russian sodomites' (by whom he seems to have meant Count Stenbock and perhaps his friends).³² That Johnson was at least familiar with the idea of Greek love is evidenced by the tongue-in-cheek poem 'In Praise of Youth' (1891), later rewritten as the more earnest and critical 'A Dream of Youth' and dedicated in the 1895 *Poems* to Alfred Douglas. In this poem and elsewhere, he treats homosexuality, like many schoolboys, as something to be joked about in theory, but condemned in practice, though this did not always involve condemning the practitioner outright. It is very likely that his poem 'Destroyer of a Soul', beginning 'I hate you with a necessary hate', is addressed to Oscar Wilde, to whom he had introduced Alfred Douglas in 1891; and his letters suggest he was willing to chat and

³¹ See Lesley Higgins, 'A "Thousand Solaces" for the Modern Spirit: Walter Pater's Religious Discourse', in *Victorian Religious Discourse: New Directions in Criticism*, ed. Jude Nixon (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 189-204.

³² See letters to Oswald Carnegie Johnson, in *Roseliep Personal Papers*.

even flirt with Simeon Solomon, albeit with much laughter and exaggerated anxiety afterwards: 'I can never see him again', he writes to Oswald, 'without a police escort for protection'.³³ Johnson nowhere represents himself as someone permanently interested in 'the Greek delusion', or as homosexual in the modern sense, but these letters do illustrate the limitations of the hetero/homosexual binary when describing sexual representations.

Having converted to Catholicism in 1891, Johnson increasingly both chastened and Christianized Pater, though only insofar as was compatible with full acknowledgment of his friend's emphasis on sense experience. In doing so, he repeats the familiar Tractarian process of co-opting cultural products for religious ends; he can be seen as doing for Pater what many of those of the last generation interested in Tractarian religion had done for the Romantic poets, while some of the ease with which he does this can no doubt be assigned to Pater's initial secularization of Tractarian ideas. In the process, Johnson elaborates a model of Catholic aestheticism that can be traced through both his poetry and criticism, in which intense individual spirituality is reconciled to community, imagined variously as involvement in 'the world', social duty, and simply the need for companionship. That he remains close to Pater's work rather than proceeding through biographical speculation, taking liberties only in drawing religious intimations where they are not explicit, further illustrates that work's responsiveness to such reading.

In his 1893 reviews of *Plato and Platonism*, placed together as 'Mr Pater Upon Plato' in *Post Liminium* (a posthumous volume of essays ostensibly edited by Thomas Whittmore, but actually by Johnson's Catholic friend Louise Imogen Guiney, who spliced together reviews and articles upon similar themes to make whole

³³ Letter to Oswald Carnegie Johnson [undated], in *Roseliep Personal Papers*.

essays), Johnson Christianizes Pater's Plato, and in the process Pater himself. David DeLaura has shown how, in *Plato and Platonism*, 'Plato is made to sound like an aestheticized Newman'.³⁴ Johnson draws out the residue of Newman in Pater's Plato, and in the process reads Pater through his own moral-aesthetic composite. But he does so by emphasizing the importance of *both* sensuous pleasure and self-restraint to Pater, Plato, and Newmanite Christianity alike. He suggests at once that Plato himself can be read as a pseudo-Christian author, and that Pater's reading of Plato, and incorporation of his ideas into his own philosophy, is also of this nature. But his starting point for this project is Pater's emphasis on Plato's sensuousness. 'Once more', he says 'Mr. Pater has shown us how fruitful of good things is this visible world, with its garniture and furniture for every sense', and this especially in his portrayal of Plato's having 'used the eyes, together with the mind, of an artist'.

He follows this with deliberate comparison of Pater's role as lecturer to the Platonic (and, in the *Phaedrus*, explicitly homosexual) relation between inspirer and hearer, showing how seriously he has taken Pater's denotation of Plato as a 'lover'. 'It is as though he bade his hearers, in their wonderful Oxford, look upon their studies of philosophy as of a piece really with their other studies by field or river.' But he then brings together Plato and Pater in qualifying this statement; 'yet Plato is not of Cyrene', he reminds us, alluding not only to Plato's position in Greek philosophy, but also both Pater's description of Marius's initial Epicureanism as the 'New Cyreniacism', and the adoption of this term by those of Pater's critics who wished to represent him as an amoral hedonist. Having brought Plato and Pater together in this way, Johnson then poses a series of questions in which this modulation of Plato's (and Pater's) sensuousness becomes a Christianization:

³⁴ DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, 338.

just where and how does Plato's high philosophy join hands with his delight in visible life? What harmony was that he would effect among the multitudinous sounds, the many colours, of this world? Can life become a fair service of God, by any disciplined care for the best things in life, the worthiest and the finest of them all?

Comparing Plato's desire for high, spiritual beauty to Augustine's for the beauty of God, he says 'there was no such outbreak from the soul of Plato; but, from the first a lover, he also passed into a knower of an unoriginate beauty and of a very light'. The word 'unoriginate', a theological term referring to God's position as first cause, suggests that Plato's idealism can be read as an intuition of the divinity, while perhaps hinting also at the unreproductive nature of this ideal. And both Plato and Augustine are interpreted as inhabiting a kind of Paterian aestheticism through their perception of 'beauty'. Just as in the *Winchester Letters* Johnson was eager to find similarities between philosophical systems and faiths, so now, having committed to the actual truth of a particular system, he interprets all similar sentiments as intuitions of this truth: Plato's 'intuition was much that of Augustine'. His next sentence suggests that Pater himself deliberately makes this elision between Plato's 'high philosophy' and Christian morality: 'Mr. Pater, in his first lectures, traces the growth of Plato's mind upon these matters'.³⁵

Essential to this portrait is Pater's lingering over Plato's potentially sensual nature. But also essential is the curtailment of sensuality through self-restraint. Pater characterizes Plato, says Johnson, as having 'a love of love, sensuous certainly, by virtue, or vice, of a passionate temperament; but tempered by an austere love of temperance, restraint, and order'. Johnson, more than Pater, is careful to concede in

³⁵ Johnson, 'Mr. Pater Upon Plato' (amalgamation of two review essays, both first published 1893), in *Post Liminium*, 1-10; 3.

order to disarm the possible interpretations of this temperate passion, the ways in which it had been taken by, among others, those apologists for the ‘Greek delusion’. Like Pater’s followers, Plato’s ‘lovers, not always wise, have been something too apt to take him, literally, “at his word”’. This is not only dangerous; it is also, according to Johnson, to misinterpret Plato. ‘In ethics, his ultimate aim [...] was a “faire music and divine concent”, body obeying soul’.³⁶ The phrase ‘divine concent’ suggests the early modern use of the word ‘concent’ to indicate the harmonious relationship of voices, and more specifically the ethical application of such harmony.³⁷ He expands upon this Christianization in his description of Plato’s ‘Dorian self-restraint’: ‘It is, if you consider it, a scholar’s vision: away with the vulgarity of excess! And a saint’s vision: away with the iniquity of lawlessness!’³⁸ This scholar-saint is evidently as much Johnson’s vision of Pater as of Plato; in the poem ‘Walter Pater’ (1902), one of the last poems that Johnson wrote, he calls Pater ‘scholarship’s constant saint’.³⁹

A similar impression is gained in ‘The Work of Mr. Pater’ (1894), published only a month after Pater’s death. In describing *Marius*, Johnson says its success arises from a ‘keeping close to life, a sensitiveness almost in excess’, yet also that ‘a marvellous self-discipline has made the book’. Unsurprisingly, Johnson interprets *Marius* as an essentially Christian book, in which, though Marius is not actually converted, ‘yet the sweetness and the greatness of Christianity steal over him, as over the reader’.⁴⁰ Marius himself he describes, like Pater and Plato, as exercising a restraint that not only intensifies an inner passion, but also turns this passion towards a yearning for an ideal: ‘this questioner of the oracles, with so much fire beneath his

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

³⁷ Christopher R. Wilson and Michela Calore, *Music in Shakespeare: A Dictionary* (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 111.

³⁸ Johnson, ‘Mr. Pater Upon Plato’, 6.

³⁹ Johnson, *Collected Poems*, ed. Fletcher, 225-26; 226 [line 23].

⁴⁰ Johnson, ‘The Work of Mr. Pater’, 25.

dainty and deliberate bearing, so much wistful anger and hunger of heart; amorous of nothing else, unable to be at peace with less, than the *Deus absconditus* of his desire'. Again, the introduction of the phrase *Deus absconditus* (hidden God), most famously associated with Thomas Aquinas, interprets Marius's life as a Christian search for divine truth, a 'pilgrim's progress'.⁴¹ He also is a scholar-saint, while the 'hidden' nature of the God he seeks is reminiscent of the Tractarian 'reserve' that we saw, in Chapter One, to be closely entwined with valuation of celibacy (cf. 92).

Johnson traces the Christian spirit of *Marius* not only to the events of the book, but also its style. Its austere control of sensuous pleasure is for Johnson a specifically Christian impulse. The influence this style exercises over the reader at first seems, he says, 'as though the writer "willed" it almost without words', but in reality 'it is through his austere delicacy in using them that the miracle is worked upon us'.⁴² It is entirely open to us to take Johnson's use of the word 'miracle' here seriously; Pater's style very likely did appear to him as the working of the divinity in the world. In the poem 'Walter Pater' he describes Pater as:

[...] he who toiled so well
 Secrets of grace to tell
 Graciously; as the awed rejoicing priest
 Officiates at the feast,
 Knowing, how deep within the liturgies
 Lie hid the mysteries.⁴³

Again both the mysteries of God and culture are hidden, requiring in both cases the intermission of and interpretation of a priest-critic. 'Grace', too, was an important concept for Johnson. Elsewhere, he posits 'grace' as the essential link between stylistic beauty and divine favour. 'Grace!' he says, 'the word sums up theology; and

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴³ *Collected Poems*, ed. Fletcher, 225 [lines 1-6].

it is no less the secret soul of literature'.⁴⁴ That he connects literary grace in this poem with the role of the priest, as arbiter between worshippers and those 'mysteries' of the liturgy, is reminiscent of his association in the *Winchester Letters* of a priest's position with an ideal reconciliation of individual withdrawal with social duty and influence. The roles of scholar-saint and priest are combined in Pater's style, which is both passionate in restraint and able to communicate this restrained passion to others.

Poetry

In his poetry, Johnson often describes a Paterian, but thoroughly Christianized process of self-restraint, not as a denial of sensuous pleasure, but as the productive containment and transformation of potential sensuality. Perhaps his most famous poem, 'The Dark Angel' (1894), written in the year of Pater's death, describes temptation as a necessary process for the attainment of holiness, since it provokes the individual moral agent to make a conscious separation of sensuous from sensual experience. The 'dark angel' of temptation is imagined literally as Satan, who must be acknowledged to have been appointed to his role by God, as a means of turning one from the passive state of indifference to an active holiness:

I fight thee, in the Holy Name!
Yet, what thou dost, is what God saith:
Tempter! should I escape thy flame,
Thou wilt have helped my soul from Death[.]⁴⁵

The utility of temptation is outlined by Thomas à Kempis in his *Imitation of Christ*. 'Temptations', he says, 'are oftentimes right profitable to men, though they be heavy

⁴⁴ [Lionel Johnson], 'The Way of Writing', *The Anti-Jacobin*, 15 (9 May, 1891), 347-48; 347.

⁴⁵ *Collected Poems*, ed. Fletcher, 52-53; 53 [lines 41-44].

and grievous; for in them a man is meekened, purged and sharply taught'.⁴⁶ Johnson follows this poem, in the roughly thematical arrangement of his poems in the original volume, with another entitled 'A Friend', also dated 1894, in which he prays that a seemingly happy but secular friend be sent a dark angel like his own, that he may be turned toward God:

But in the lonely hours I learn,
How I can serve him and thank him best:
*God! trouble him: that he may turn
Through sorrow to the only rest.*⁴⁷

Critical response to 'The Dark Angel' has generally treated the poem as what Ian Fletcher calls 'lyric autobiography', and has been concerned with the identification of the specific temptation that the poem may be thought to describe, often in order to find in it an expression of violent inner conflict that could explain Johnson's alcoholism and sudden death.⁴⁸ Early attempts generally read it as either a confession of struggle with alcohol, or of vague, unspecific unhappiness which explains the drinking.⁴⁹ Since the 1970s it has been more common to read it as revelation of repressed homosexuality. Brian Reade describes it as a 'homosexual poem' that can 'barely be read correctly if the anguish expressed in it is not grasped as a fantasy of starved affection', and Ellis Hanson as a 'recognition of the sadness and the loneliness of the Victorian homosexual in his efforts at sublimation'.⁵⁰ A handful of critics have circumvented this search for specific temptation, reading 'The Dark Angel' as a more

⁴⁶ Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, book 1, chapter 13, 20-22; 20.

⁴⁷ *Collected Poems*, ed. Fletcher, 53-53; 54 [lines 9-12].

⁴⁸ Ian Fletcher, 'Lionel Johnson and "The Dark Angel"', in *W. B. Yeats and his Contemporaries*, ed. Ian Fletcher (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), 311.

⁴⁹ See Arthur W. Patrick, *Lionel Johnson (1867-1902): Poète et Critique* (Paris: L. Rodstein, 1939), 67; Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 243; Raymond Roseliep, 'Introduction', in *Some Letters*, 1-9c; 9b.

⁵⁰ Brian Reade, *Sexual Heretics: Male Homosexuality in English Literature from 1850 to 1900* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970), 39; Ellis Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 88.

general meditation on conflict between spiritual and worldly experience. R. K. R. Thornton describes the poem as an expression of ‘finely grandiloquent ascetic idealism [...] balancing the fear of worldly corruption’, Ronald Schuchard as the epitome of the ‘spiritual-sensual malaise’ passed by the 1890s to the modernist period.⁵¹ And Murray Pittock spiritualizes the entire conflict, seeing it as ‘a battle between two kinds of transcendent reality’, namely Aestheticism and Christianity, which Pittock represents as inevitably opposed.⁵²

Pittock is right, I think, to identify Aestheticism as part of the poem’s immediate context. But given Johnson’s emphasis elsewhere on the importance of sense experience, it seems more productive to read the conflict of ‘The Dark Angel’ not as between two kinds of transcendent reality, but rather between two kinds of relationship with the physical world. The particular function of the angel is to turn a potentially innocent experience into a sensual one:

When sunlight glows upon the flowers,
Or ripples down the dancing sea:
Thou, with thy troop of passionate powers,
Beleaguerest, bewilderest, me.⁵³

The temptation of the poem is not limited to sense experience. ‘Because of thee, no thought, no thing, / Abides for me undesecrate.’ But its examples generally are sensuous, and the experience of beauty is particularly picked out: ‘all the things of beauty burn / With flames of evil ecstasy’.⁵⁴ Again this is a common feature of Tractarian religious experience, especially later in the century, when the Movement’s

⁵¹ R. K. R. Thornton, *The Decadent Dilemma* (London: Edward Arnold, 1983), 125; Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot’s Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 5.

⁵² Pittock, ‘The Poetry of Lionel Johnson’, 45.

⁵³ *Collected Poems*, ed. Fletcher, 52 [lines 21-24].

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, [lines 5-6, 15-16].

intense focus on sense experience as revealing God's immanence, especially through art and nature, led them also to agonize over the fine line between sacred and profane sensuous pleasure.⁵⁵ It is likely that Johnson, having collated such writings with his reading of Pater, took it with him on his conversion to Catholicism.

Johnson's underscoring in 'The Dark Angel' and elsewhere of the *use* to which this contest can be put, especially within the context of beauty, sounds similar to a Christianized version of Pater's lingering over the borders between sensuous and sensual experience. Its mechanism of reserve and transformation is also reminiscent of the medical logic associated with seminal retention. Another set of poems written around the same time and entitled 'To Passions' (1893-94) elaborates on the process of this transformation. Having complained of 'Passion, imperious, insolent', the poet cries:

Thou fool! For if thou have thy way with me,
Thou wilt be still the same: but victor, I
Should make some fair perfection out of thee,
And reach the starry Heaven of Heavens thereby.⁵⁶

As in 'The Dark Angel', the business of overcoming temptation is not an act of renunciation so much as transformation, the logic of which resembles that of Pater's productive continence.

From 'The Dark Angel' a possibility arises, despite its protracted fretting over temptation, of what a triumph over that temptation would look like, a world in which nature and art can be enjoyed without fear of 'The hinting tone, the haunting laugh'.⁵⁷ Such a regenerate world would not, it must be noted, be one of calm detachment from sensuous experience. Johnson's poetry generally reserves 'calm' as a description of

⁵⁵ Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 102.

⁵⁶ *Collected Poems*, ed. Fletcher, 137-38; 138 [lines 20-24].

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 53 [line 38].

the height of pagan virtue, the furthest towards virtue that one can get without God. 'A Friend' represents the friend as 'A classic saint, in self-control, / And comeliness, and quiet mirth', yet prays for the disturbing of that calm.⁵⁸ In contrast, holiness is always for Johnson an impassioned state. An early poem, 'An Ideal' (1888), also represents the drama of temptation: '*Come!* sigh the shrouding airs of earth: / *Be with the burning night*'. The poet resists – 'I come not. Off, odorous airs!' – but, though the temptation itself is named 'passion' (he scoffs 'let passion garnish her wild lairs / Hold her fierce holiday), yet the 'ideal' of the title is not calm, but an alternative passion:

Mine be all proud and lonely scorn,
 Keeping the crystal law
 And pure air of the eternal morn:
 And passion, but of awe.⁵⁹

It is likely this impassioned state, rather than cold calmness, that we are to imagine in the final lines of 'The Dark Angel': '*Lonely, unto the Lone I go; / Divine, to the Divinity*'.⁶⁰

Yet despite the passionate, sensuous nature of Johnson's religiosity, resistance to temptation is for him always associated with singleness. It is this singleness (which should not be automatically interpreted as a negative state) that suggests that the 'passion' resisted might be specifically sexual; that giving in to it would yield something other than loneliness, a sinful connection with another person. But if this sexual interpretation is admitted, homosexual orientation is not the only possible interpretation for this contained sexuality. '*Lonely, unto the Lone I go*' closely echoes many Tractarian vows of celibacy, so often imagined as a sacrifice of the intimate

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 53 [lines 3-4].

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 152-53; 152 [lines 5-6, 9, 11-12], 153 [lines 17-20].

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 53 [lines 53-56].

companionship of marriage, only imperfectly replaced by intimate same-sex friendship.

Johnson's poems often describe an impassioned single state as, if not ideal for all, at least necessary to some in a world less than perfect. 'The Church of a Dream' (1890) imagines a church abandoned in a world 'autumnal' and 'pale', in which 'Only one ancient Priest offers the Sacrifice, / Murmuring holy Latin immemorial'. The poem thus seems to represent the Anglo-Catholic (this is pre-conversion) sense of a minority defence of the 'true' English Church.⁶¹ 'Magic' (1887-88), written while Johnson was still at Winchester, first describes the magician as embodying a Newmanite rejection of reason – 'I work not, as logicians work, / Who but to ranked and marshalled reason yield' – before going on to repudiate those who misunderstand the life of the scholar: 'They wrong with ignorance a royal choice, / Who cavil at my loneliness and labour'. 'I choose laborious loneliness' he continues, scorning those who 'Lead Love in triumph through the dancing city'. Again, an attitude to the world is outlined with which 'Love' is incompatible, but which produces a different kind of passion: 'Ah! light imaginations, that discern / No passion in the citadel of passion'.⁶²

A more overtly Christian example is 'Our Lady of the Snows' (1887), written in defence of the monastic spirit against R. L. Stevenson's poem of the same name, which had described the 'unfraternal brothers' as 'aloof, unhelpful, and unkind'.⁶³ Written in the first person, and therefore exploring the epistemology of the monk from his own point of view rather than another's, the poem protests: 'You are the happier for our prayer; / The guerdon of our souls, you share'. The monk is not anti-world, but rather sacrifices his own potential for worldly pleasure in order to allow the

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 65-66; 65 [line 6], 66 [lines 9-10].

⁶² *Ibid.*, 132-34; 132 [lines 1-2], 133 [lines 26-27, 46, 47, 32-33].

⁶³ R. L. Stevenson, 'Our Lady of the Snows', in *Collected Poems*, ed. Roger C. Lewis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003; poem first published 1887), 89-90; 89 [lines 12, 9].

innocent pleasure of others: 'Our spirits with your tempters fight'. The monks are themselves represented as enjoying no worldly pleasure themselves, sensuous or sensual; 'we live alone, / Where no joy comes'.⁶⁴ After Johnson's death many friends remembered having heard that he was about to enter a monastery, and his letters suggest that a vocation for monasticism and the ministry were ideas that he liked to play with, or have people believe of him. But his poetic treatment of monks and nuns implies that, while he saw their lives as impassioned rather than cold, nonetheless their denial of sensuous as well as sensual experience was a sticking point when he tried to imagine himself in such a role. In 'To a Belgian Friend' (1898), addressing Olivier Georges Destrée, who had entered a Benedictine order in October 1898, he says, while offering 'praise', that 'The nothingness, which you have flung away, / To me seems full of fond delightful cares'. He ends by putting himself in the position of those prayed for by the religious: 'Give me your prayers'.⁶⁵ The cloistered monastic role is admitted to be holiest, though by no means suited for all.

A more melancholy note is struck in one of his most commonly anthologized poems, 'Mystic and Cavalier' (1889), in which the cerebral mystic bewails the distance between himself and the world. Again, this poem is almost universally interpreted as autobiographical, with the famous line 'Go from me: I am one of those, who fall' often used to refer to his drunkenness and even the fall that killed him; 'Johnson fell quite often, both symbolically and physically' reads his entry in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.⁶⁶ The poem can be read, however, as an experiment with the splitting of experience into the entirely worldly and the entirely

⁶⁴ *Collected Poems*, ed. Fletcher, 75-76; 75 [lines 25-26], 76 [line 68, 69-70].

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 216-17; 217 [lines 5, 6-7, 9].

⁶⁶ R. K. R. Thornton, 'Johnson, Lionel Pigot (1867-1902)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); online edition, May 2007, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/34204> [accessed 2 May 2016]; *Collected Poems*, ed. Fletcher, 24-25; 24 [line 1].

spiritual, with the latter particularly coming in for negative representation. This is, as we have seen, by no means in conflict with Johnson's religious orientation. Knight and Mason have highlighted the anxiety of Catholic writers in particular to distinguish between mysticism and religion in the period, and have warned against critical confusion of the terms.⁶⁷ Johnson's poem displays a similar anxiety. As in Pater's treatment of medieval mysticism in 'Poems by William Morris' and 'Aesthetic Poetry', the mystic's excessive focus on the unworldly causes a spiritual malaise. But this malaise does not produce the 'tension of nerve, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliance and relief', as it did for Pater's mystic; such tension is reserved by Johnson for the properly sensuous religious.⁶⁸ Instead it causes an excessive preoccupation with death that is every bit as bad as, if not worse than, the irreligious state of the cavalier, and is described in similar terms to a desire for 'calm': 'Who ever sought that sudden calm, if I / Sought not?'⁶⁹ Another poem commonly read as autobiographical, 'Nihilism' (1888), dramatizes a similar excessive abstraction, this time resulting from obsession with self. Again there is a preoccupation with death and calm:

Where silent things, and unimpassioned things,
Where things of nought, and things decaying, are:
I shall be calm soon, with the calm, death brings.

It is in this context that Johnson writes the words, so often quoted against him, 'of life I am afraid'.⁷⁰ This spiritual position is entirely different from that professed in the majority of his poetry, in his letters, and in much of his criticism.

⁶⁷ Knight and Mason, *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature*, 206-12.

⁶⁸ [Walter Pater], 'Poems by William Morris', *The Westminster Review*, 34:2 (October, 1868), 300-12; 303.

⁶⁹ *Collected Poems*, ed. Fletcher, 25 [lines 19-20].

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 160-61; 161 [lines 5-6, 160 [line 4].

Johnson's poetry, then, develops an individualist spirituality that is not an alienation from the world, but rather an ongoing process in which the sensuous is separated from the sensual. When applied, as it often is, to the experience of art and beauty, this method reproduces the logic of the productive continence that Johnson in his criticism attributed to Pater, though it also has clear roots in Tractarian attitudes towards both sensuous experience and art. In his criticism, written almost entirely after he moved to London in 1890, Johnson builds upon this ideal spiritual position, combining his Paterianism with his reading of Newman and others to create a Catholic aestheticism that is both firmly social and sexually continent.

Criticism

Johnson's mature critical career began in 1890, when he moved to London armed with letters of introduction written by Pater to several editors. He soon began to write an impressive number of reviews, most of which were unsigned, a practice that only faltered in the last few years of his life, when for months at a time his hands were swollen enough with gout to prevent his writing.⁷¹ In 1891 he joined the staff of the short-lived *Anti-Jacobin* under the editorship of Frederick Greenwood. As well as acting as general reviewer, he also provided a series of articles on mostly literary topics, in which he outlined the beginnings of a coherent literary theory. This section looks at the *Anti-Jacobin* articles, before showing the development of their main themes in Johnson's only critical monograph, *The Art of Thomas Hardy*, as well as in his general reviewing practice. Among these may be traced a recurrent insistence on a

⁷¹ See letter to Katherine Tynan, 8 October 1901, Manchester, John Rylands Library, *The Tynan/Hinkson Collection*, KTG 1/463/1b.

literary sociability that he associates closely with sense as distinct from sensuality, and with the mechanism of productive continence outlined in his poetry.

Johnson's critical stance is heavily influenced by his reading of Newman, Arnold, and of course Pater. It is difficult to allocate aspects of this thinking to any one of these rather than the others, partly because, as David DeLaura has shown at length, Newman had a profound influence on Arnold, and both Newman and Arnold deeply shaped the thinking of Pater.⁷² But it is also true that Johnson deliberately selects aspects of nineteenth-century cultural humanism that can be found in all three, or at least two of the three, and uses this synthesis to claim for humanism a universal interest that transcends all time and place. He then follows Newman in identifying this cultural humanism as essentially Christian, though his doing so via Arnold and Pater results in his humanism's encompassing a much wider range than Newman's. Whereas Newman worried that art could become an end in itself, a distraction from rather than help to religion, this is almost impossible for Johnson, for whom the ends of good art *are* those of religion.⁷³

Much of what Johnson valued in both literature and life can be summed up in the words 'human' and 'humane'. But he meant far more by it than might at first be thought, referring to a nexus of values – tradition, obedience, community, and self-denial, but also sensuous experience and spiritual ecstasy – that can be traced as points of overlap between Tractarian and Catholic theology. For Tractarians as for Catholics, the doctrines of tradition and of the Church as a communal body both on earth and in Heaven were intimately connected. One of the main tenets of the Oxford Movement was that the Church had to be considered, not as a mere earthly institution

⁷² DeLaura, *Hebrew and Hellene*, *passim*.

⁷³ For Newman's thinking about the relationship between art and religion, see Hilary Fraser, *Beauty and Belief: Aesthetics and Religion in Victorian Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 26-28.

that could be separated from the individual conscience, but as a body encompassing both space and time, making religion a community into which the individual was initiated rather than a matter of individual reading of Scripture. To this end, tradition was valued as the lifeblood of the Christian community, connecting any newcomer both to the Church of the past and that of the present; to ignore tradition was to cut oneself off from true religious understanding.⁷⁴

Matthew Arnold secularized these twin concerns into an opposition to what he called ‘provincialism’, and an ideal of ‘disinterestedness’ that emphasized both community in the form of social duty and a tradition of elite learning that extended through time and space. Johnson, rather than returning to the Tractarians’ theologically dense position, effectively re-Christianizes the Arnoldian position, traces of which he knew could also be found in Pater (particularly Pater read through his own portrait of Plato). He also uses the similarity between Pater’s and Newman’s rhetoric of the ‘personal’ to reinvigorate both, giving to Newman’s concessions towards art a newly sensuous warmth, while giving to Pater’s ‘kindly love’ an element of social duty that he never elaborated. The thread with which he connects these three humanistic positions is sexual continence. With this ideal he strings together Pater’s discipline, Arnold’s Hellenism and Newman’s ‘reserve’ to create a recognisably humanist temper that could be at once a style and an ethic, and within which artistic and Christian morals were at one.

Richard Le Gallienne described Johnson as ‘a literary Catholic believing devoutly in the apostolic succession of all really great writers’.⁷⁵ An *Anti-Jacobin* article entitled ‘Inspirers and Teachers’ posits a theory of literary sociability very

⁷⁴ See Owen Chadwick ed., *The Mind of the Oxford Movement*, (London: Adam Charles Black, 1960), 38-41.

⁷⁵ Richard Le Gallienne, *Retrospective Reviews: A Literary Log*, 2 vols (London: John Lane, 1896), vol. 2, 234.

similar to that expressed as a literary Communion of Saints in the *Winchester Letters*. ‘The inspirers of the world’, he writes, ‘form a company of gracious or commanding men, champions by their very names and memories against degrading views of life’.⁷⁶ The examples he gives are a mixture of Christian and secular, as well as alive and dead: Thomas à Kempis, Carlyle, Arnold, and Ruskin; ‘each is human and humane’.⁷⁷ But most conspicuous in the piece is the figure of Newman. Newman had called for feeling over reason in matters of faith; for example in ‘The Tamworth Reading Room’ (1841): ‘after all, man is *not* a reasoning animal; he is a seeing, feeling, contemplating, acting animal’.⁷⁸ Johnson follows and extends this line of thought, writing: ‘it may be a pitiful confession, but it is true, that they are the world’s spiritual masters who tell us of things irreducible to forms of logic’. He continues, ‘after all, it is by the affections that men become powerful and become loveable: by the humanity of their spirit more than by the strength of their intellect’.⁷⁹ Belief in the ultimate ascendancy of faith over reason was common to all Tractarians, but Johnson connects his communion of love directly with Newman. In then quoting his heraldic motto, ‘Cor ad cor loquitur: heart to heart speaketh’, Johnson connects the word ‘humanity’ with a particular type of religious spirit, relieving it of any potentially secularist associations.⁸⁰ He also reminds readers that Newman also believed in a spiritual elite connected by love, though not as open to secular membership as Johnson’s.

Though not named, the spirit of Pater also hovers behind Johnson’s adoption of a Platonic title for this piece. ‘Inspirers’ clearly echoes the Platonic relationship of inspirers and hearers that Johnson associated with Pater, but which he interpreted in

⁷⁶ [Lionel Johnson], ‘Inspirers and Teachers’, *The Anti-Jacobin*, 26 (25 July, 1891), 611.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ John Henry Newman, ‘The Tamworth Reading Room’, in *Discussions and Arguments on Various Subjects* (London: Pickering, 1872), 254-305, 294; first published in *The Times* (5 and 27 February, 1841).

⁷⁹ Johnson, ‘Inspirers and Teachers’, 611.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

‘Mr. Pater Upon Plato’ in a thoroughly Christianized, and sexually chastened, sense. He can therefore combine this Paterian Platonism seamlessly with Newmanite Catholicism: ‘the inspirers of the world are not they who impose laws, but they who win hearts: it was the secret of Newman’. It seems unlikely that Johnson is deliberately compiling a homosexual network here, as recent queer readings of Pater and Newman would suggest; this is a point at which emerging homosexual discourse and that of sexual continence overlap. Rather, he is deliberately widening his cultural sainthood by focusing on points of agreement between Tractarian and Aesthetic thought, creating the impression of a continuous set of beliefs that can be understood as a universal truth that transcends time and place. ‘The “spectators of all time and of all existence”, as Plato calls them, have nothing of [...] parochial and circumscribed authority; they are men who would be at home in any country and at any time’.⁸¹ This is a humanism that is *both* religious and secular, or rather can, from Johnson’s point of view, be split into its conscious and unconscious religious elements; his further recognition of this universal truth as particularly Newmanite identifies it as Christian, perhaps even Catholic, regardless of its secular proponents.

The interdependence of tradition and community is stressed in an article entitled ‘The Way of Writing’, and both are made to rely upon Paterian stylistic discipline. The ‘ways’ of writing are the stylistic ‘high traditions’ once recognized by all writing men, amounting to ‘literary morals’, and consisting in ‘those fascinating qualities, of stateliness, of moderation, of *grace*’.⁸² Moreover they are the ways of the ‘great dead Kings of literature’, connecting a writer to a large literary community. These ways are achieved only through a dedicated discipline which, it is heavily implied, connects these literary morals with personal ones. ‘Composure, then, a

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² Johnson, ‘The Way of Writing’, 347-48; 347.

composition, must have certain qualities of law and order, qualities of such a nature that they produce grace and beauty through obedience to wise rule'.⁸³ This principle of stylistic 'obedience to wise rule' is surely similar to that of Catholic as opposed to Anglican obedience. It is also here that he explicitly equates stylistic with theological grace: as quoted above, 'Grace! the word sums up theology; and it is no less the secret soul of literature'.⁸⁴ He ends the piece with the words 'Dead! you and I and our works, because ours is not "the way of writing"' (though it seems unlikely that Johnson would always be willing to include himself in this category).⁸⁵ The word 'dead' brackets together exclusion from community, and from a literary immortality that verges upon the literal afterlife, a fate reminiscent of the 'Second death, that never dies' of 'The Dark Angel'.

But such obedience and discipline, while reminiscent of Arnoldian 'disinterestedness', are more like Pater's 'style' in that they produce, not cold detachment, but rather a warm personal element, an unselfish 'kindly love' rooted in community rather than ego, and thus approximating also to what Newman meant by the 'personal'. It should be remembered at this point that Johnson implied that he had been read to from or shown manuscripts of *Gaston de Latour* in 1891, the same year in which these articles were written (cf. 165). 'There are certain writers', writes Johnson, 'who share this charm: writers full of energy and life; but writers, too, of dignity, of meditation'.⁸⁶ 'Grace' for Johnson is a link between literary style and the humane spirit outlined in 'Inspirers and Teachers'. This is demonstrated in the article 'Of the Spirit of Books': 'books, either redolent of mellow age, or full of a writer's

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 347.

kindliness and grace: these we prize, and these we love'.⁸⁷ To the writer he says: 'give yourself, your personal force, or grace, your spirit and your very heart, and we will welcome your book and you through it'.⁸⁸ Johnson's discipline and disinterestedness is less that of a philosopher king and more that embodied by the ideal Catholic priest, a restraint that floods the world with warmth and passion.

Johnson is aware that this 'personal' element is in danger of being mistaken for a cult of 'personality', a principle of ego rather than kindliness. It was a danger that the Tractarians faced also, while it had been the source of much of what Johnson, among others, saw as the misinterpretation of Pater, who confronted the problem in the essay 'Style'.⁸⁹ He is far more explicit than Pater about the difference between the personal and the egotistical, and makes this distinction with reference to sexuality, relying as Pater had done on the traditional association of sexuality with selfishness, like Pater also associating these qualities with transience. In an article entitled 'Criticism in Corruption', he castigates critics who value the open expression of sexuality in literature, reading this theme as an expression also of all that is selfish, egotistical, and more importantly transient and 'dead' in literature and life. Referring to a critic's claim that 'tis the nature and degree of his sense for love that give the truest measure to the poet', he writes, 'by love we must understand sensuality, animalism, quite as much as the higher passion. Now, this is false to the verdict of all great poets and critics, from ancient to modern times'.⁹⁰ The appeal is immediately to the great traditions of literature, in which he finds an antidote to modern selfishness: referring to the same critic, he says that 'after reading him, we want to wash our

⁸⁷ [Lionel Johnson], 'Of the Spirit of Books', *The Anti-Jacobin*, 13 (25 April, 1891), 299-300; 299.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 300.

⁸⁹ Walter Pater, 'Style', in *Appreciations: With an Essay on Style* (London: Macmillan, 1889), 1-36.

⁹⁰ [Lionel Johnson], 'Criticism in Corruption', *The Anti-Jacobin*, 6 (7 March, 1891), 131-32; 132.

hands, take a walk into the country, and come back to Homer or Addison'.⁹¹ Writers full of 'grace' are also represented as clean, like nature, of corrupting sensuality: we may remember his boast, on having listened to the sexual gossip of his school friends, that he could 'return freely to walk over the downs' (*Winchester Letters*, 76).

Modern sensuality is also described quite clearly as a symptom of cultural decadence: 'these men seem to delight in disease, distortion, in deformity'. It is, he continues, 'time to protest against this; for there is a vast deal too much of it'.⁹² This objection to late nineteenth-century Decadence as a cultural fashion is expressed in 'The Cultured Faun', the only one of the *Anti-Jacobin* articles to have received sustained scholarly attention. Reading it alongside his other productions for the same journal reveals the extent of Johnson's criticism of Decadence in this piece. 'You breed it this way', he begins:

Take a young man, who had brains as a boy, and teach him to disbelieve everything that his elders believe in matters of thought, and to reject everything that seems true to himself in matters of sentiment [...]. He will then, since he is intelligent and bright, want something to replace his early notions.⁹³

The 'cultured faun', in other words, is the product of a wanton rejection of both tradition and personal conscience, the two cornerstones of the Oxford Movement and of the Paterian aestheticism outlined in the previous chapter. The result is a parodic description of Johnson's own cultural humanism, a matter of the right behaviours for the wrong reasons. 'Externally, our hero should cultivate a reassuring sobriety of habit, with just a dash of dandy', and 'internally, a catholic sympathy with all that

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ [Lionel Johnson], 'The Cultured Faun', *The Anti-Jacobin*, 7 (14 March, 1891), 156-57; 156.

exists, and “therefore” suffers, for art’s sake’.⁹⁴ We may be reminded here of Johnson’s earlier Decadent posing, and the part that the love of suffering had played in it.

Among the preoccupations of this ‘creature’ are ‘a tender patronage of Catholicism’, in which ‘these refined persons cherish a double “passion”: the sentiment of repentant yearning and the sentiment of rebellious sin’.⁹⁵ This is the superficial and fashionable Decadent Catholicism described by Ellis Hanson.⁹⁶ Alongside this pseudo-Catholicism are found ‘occasional doses of “Hellenism”: by which we mean the Ideal of the Cultured Faun. That is to say, a flowery Paganism, such as no “Pagan” ever had’.⁹⁷ Within this Johnson mentions the Decadent fashion for what he has elsewhere called ‘the Greek delusion’, referring to ‘the elegant languors and favourite vices of (let us parade our “decadent” learning) the *Stratonis Epigrammata*’.⁹⁸ The latter indicates the homoerotic Greek epigrams, known as the *Musa Puerilis*, or The Boyish Muse, of Straton of Sardis.

It must be acknowledged here that Johnson is not criticising Decadent literature wholesale. In an article for *The Century Guild Hobby Horse*, entitled ‘A Note Upon the Practice and Theory of Verse at the Present Time Obtaining in France’ (1891), he praises French Decadent and Symbolist literature as productions of ‘infinite pains, and of singular attention’; as ‘universal, not parochial’.⁹⁹ ‘The Cultured Faun’ criticizes Decadence as a cultural phenomenon rather than a literary aesthetic, acknowledging that while it produces, at its best, excellent poetry, much of its mediocre produce is antithetical to the values that Johnson elsewhere professes.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁹⁶ Hanson, *Decadence and Catholicism*, *passim*.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Lionel Johnson, ‘A Note Upon the Practice and Theory of Verse at the Present Time Obtaining in France’, *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 5:22 (April, 1891), 61-66; 64, 65.

These values, at once literary and ethical, are most boldly stated in Johnson's only full-length critical book. Commissioned by John Lane and written in 1892, *The Art of Thomas Hardy* was not published until 1894. Johnson compared the quality of Hardy's work, rather than his moral principles, with that of Wordsworth. The terms in which he describes both are strongly reminiscent of his portrait of the Paterian scholar-saint. 'The works of each bring before our minds the presence of a mind burning with passion, but strong to restrain it', he writes, continuing to describe their work as having 'that beauty of restrained art, which enchants us beyond all the charms of an art ever prodigal and gorgeous' (180). And, characteristically, he blends what begins as a description of style into one of character, while also using this character to define a community of scholar-saints. Though 'the conclusions of the two men are far apart', yet, 'in both there is this concentration, this intensity, signs of a certain spiritual temperament, to be seen in a large class of strenuous minds' (184).

In the opening and closing chapters of the book, Johnson outlines the philosophical underpinnings of this 'spiritual temperament'. 'I wish to declare my loyalty to the broad and high traditions of literature', he writes; 'to those humanities, which inform with the breath of life the labours of the servants, and the achievements of the masters, in that fine art' (4). These traditions of literature are, as always for Johnson, also ethical traditions. He insists on the absolute unity of a writer's ethics and aesthetics: 'It is tempting to cut the knot', he says, 'by declaring that art and morals have nothing in common: or that one must give way to the other. These theories might be rational in Utopia, and lucid in a Land of the Fourth Dimension; they are inexpressibly meaningless, here and now'. As quoted above, 'an artist is forbidden, by the facts of his natural structure, to dissociate his ethics from his aesthetics' (225). This identification of aesthetics with ethics is crucial to Johnson's

vision of a literary sainthood promoting a humane spirit through perfect art. He begins the opening chapter with the following statement:

Literature has commonly been called humane, by way of precept and of praise: if that fact be well taken to heart, it rebukes our solitary pride in our own works, and it calms our feverish concern for our own times: it fills the mind with a cheering sense of security and of companionship.

Again, 'humane' means for Johnson an ideal state of companionate detachment, a linking together of individual character and communal spirit.

And again, he finds the antithesis to this ideal state in the literature produced by modernity, a spirit reminiscent of 'The Cultured Faun'. In 'our century', he complains, 'we "refine upon our pleasures," as Congreve has it; and our refinement takes the form of that paradoxical humour, which confounds pleasure with pain, and vice with virtue' (2). This refinement matches the description that Johnson gives in the *Hobby Horse* of Decadent literature, in which 'passion, or romance, or tragedy, or sorrow, or any other form of activity or of emotion, must be refined upon, and curiously considered, for literary treatment'.¹⁰⁰ In *The Art of Thomas Hardy*, he finds that this attitude produces 'a sick and haggard literature', one 'of throbbing nerves and of subtile sensations' (2). Though he had earlier praised the best of what Decadence produced in France, here he finds it to be antithetical to his brand of humanism. 'Literature, under such auspices, must lose half its beauty, by losing all its humanity: it ceases to continue the great tradition of polite, of humane letters: it becomes the private toy of its betrayers' (3).

Against this he poses a classicism in style and manners that is inclusive, but nevertheless jealous of a certain standard. 'The classics, of all ages and in all tongues, are a catholic company: in their fellowship is room for comers from the four winds,

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

laden with infinitely various gifts and treasures.' Yet 'as the Church Catholic', though 'embracing Tauler and Saint Teresa, excludes Swedenborg and Behmen: so too acts the catholic company of the classics' (3). He continues, 'diversity is admirable: perversity is detestable' (3-4). He goes on to describe the difficult process of the artist in distinguishing diversity from perversity as an ethical dilemma solvable only by appealing to tradition, to the literary sainthood: 'in the old, great masters, and even in the excellent, old writers of less excellence, we have our test, a test of the widest application, whereby to assay ourselves and others' (6). He very deliberately makes the analogy between this community of classics and the communion of saints: in appealing to them, he says, we should 'call it rather, not a debt due, but a grace sought and received' (7). 'The humanists', he goes on, 'in any liberal sense of that term, are the catholics of art' (12).

The Art of Thomas Hardy, then, evolves a philosophical position in which aesthetics and ethics are conflated, and the passionately restrained scholar-saint is multiplied into a humanist community that transcends time and place. In the many critical reviews that Johnson wrote throughout his life, he celebrated again and again this scholar-saint temperament. He also frequently described it as celibate, virginal or cloistered, identifying its restrained disinterestedness with a wider network of values that often included productive sexual continence. Always he tests the person or group of persons under consideration against his conception of 'humanity', a kind of warm, passionate, communal sympathy that involves an initial renunciation, restraint or discipline. Thus he criticizes Lucian as having 'no humanity' because he has 'no reserves of silence, no secret sanctities that he respects', and Francis Bacon because, despite having a 'haughty reticence and restraint', his lack of humour and sympathy

‘make him an oppressive companion’.¹⁰¹ Failures of restraint he, like Pater, treats less often, but when he does an excessive sexuality is often involved. Of Marie Bashkirtseff, described as ‘a mind touched by all our modern influences’, he writes that ‘the most unpleasant things in the book are her accounts of men and of her interest in them [...], they disgust us’.¹⁰² Though it is true that it is particularly female sexuality that Johnson reacts to here, still it is difficult to feel in the context of his wider writings that a change of gender would be of much significance.

Others, however, he praises as combining impassioned restraint with humane sympathy. He calls Saint Francis a ‘humanist’ and ‘a saint so divinely human’. ‘His spirit’, he says, ‘lives wherever men and women have learned that perfect suffering, for sake of love human and divine, is perfect joy; that renunciation is enrichment’.¹⁰³ A similar enriched, joyful renunciation is found in Thomas à Kempis, his writing on whom Louise Guiney, as editor of *Post Liminium*, spliced together with sections of the *Anti-Jacobin* essay ‘Inspirers and Teachers’, as written in the same spirit. His ‘common-sense and sense of humour’ combines with his asceticism, so that he ‘makes world-wide appeal with his doctrine of joy in self-denial’. He is careful always to insist that this withdrawal, this religious asceticism, is no alienation from the world, but rather a particular relationship with it. Again he quotes from Robert Louis Stevenson’s ‘Our Lady of the Snows’, on the monastic life being ‘Aloof, unhelpful, and unkind’, but now uses Thomas à Kempis as a counter-example.

¹⁰¹ Johnson, ‘The Inimitable Lucian’ (first published 1900), in *Post Liminium*, 188-93, 193, 189; ‘Thoughts on Bacon’ (first published 1900), in *ibid.*, 131-36, 132.

¹⁰² Johnson, ‘Marie Bashkirtseff’ (first published 1891), in *Post Liminium*, 245-50; 245, 248-49.

¹⁰³ Johnson, ‘Saint Francis’ (amalgamation of two articles, first published 1899 and 1901), in *Post Liminium*, 90-97; 91, 96.

Instead, ‘a gentle beauty, with an essential sternness as its secret, belongs to the man’, a manner that has endeared him to rather than alienated him from his readers.¹⁰⁴

This ideal is far from limited to religious figures, though they may as religious celibates embody it with the greatest ease. He writes of Charlotte Brontë’s ‘intellectual and imaginative virginity’, characterizing this quality not as an entire withdrawal from sensuous or communal life, but instead a special relationship with it. ‘She was no “woman of the world”’, he writes, ‘but she was a woman of her own world, her world of the flesh as of the spirit’. Nevertheless, this ‘shy, strong woman’, he says, ‘we might almost call the nun of English literature’, though he means by this not withdrawal but discipline; she has ‘vowed obedience to the precepts of her art, faithful in the letter and in the spirit, resigned to her own inspiration’.¹⁰⁵ The connection of this attitude, that of the scholar-saint, with virginity, though not literal in this case, is consistent with Johnson’s representations elsewhere of productive continence. When writing of Virgil, therefore, it is not surprising to find him quoting Bacon’s description of him as ‘the chastest poet and royalest that to the memory of man is known’, or elaborating on this by saying Virgil ‘has a note of universality, a kinship with all the race of man’.¹⁰⁶ Continent sexuality and universality, or humanity, are clearly connected in Johnson’s criticism, just as continent sexuality and sensuous passion were connected in his poetry, through a valuation of restraint, reserve, and discipline that often seem to stretch to include sexual behaviour.

¹⁰⁴ Johnson, ‘Thomas à Kempis’ (amalgamation of two articles, first published 1891 and 1901), in *Post Liminium*, 276-83; 279, 280, 282.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, ‘Charlotte Brontë and Her Champion’ (amalgamation of two articles, both first published 1900), in *Post Liminium*, 42-50; 44, 44-45, 46.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, ‘Santo Virgilio’ (first published 1900), in *Post Liminium*, 223-29; 228.

Reception

‘Johnson was unlucky in his biographers’.¹⁰⁷ This is true in more than one sense. After Johnson’s death, his friend Arthur Galton collected his papers with the intention of writing his biography. On Galton’s death in 1921, these were sent to Johnson’s sister Isabella, the last remaining member of the family, the biography still unwritten. In 1939, Arthur W. Patrick, a Canadian doctoral student, was allowed access to at least some of this material (but seemingly made little of it) in order to write his French-language thesis.¹⁰⁸ Isabella next loaned these papers, in 1943, to an interested scholar, Adrian Earle, who also intended writing a biography. Not only were they never returned, but Earle seems to have spent the next ten years visiting prominent 1890s archives and relieving them of their Johnson-related material, including the John Gray archive held by the Dominican Library at Edinburgh and the Selwyn Image papers then held by Image’s widow.¹⁰⁹ Historian Michael Howard has called Earle, whom he knew at Oxford, ‘immoral to the point of psychopathy’.¹¹⁰ Earle was found dead in a hotel in Madrid on Christmas Day 1977, and the Johnson papers have not been seen since.¹¹¹ Though seemingly sincere in his interest in Johnson, Earle effectively wiped his presence from the archive.

The story of Johnson biography in the twentieth century is one not of lack of interest, but of many projects begun and abandoned due to lack of material. This

¹⁰⁷ Whittington-Egan, *Victorian Dark Angel*, 303.

¹⁰⁸ Patrick, *Lionel Johnson (1867-1902)*.

¹⁰⁹ For the Dominican Library, see letter from Victor Johnson (Lionel’s nephew) to Raymond Roseliep, 3 December 1960. For Image’s widow, see letter from Elinor Pugh (niece of Arthur Mackmurdo) to Raymond Roseliep, 16 September 1952. (*Raymond Roseliep Papers*, Trunk 2, Folders 10 and 30 respectively).

¹¹⁰ Michael Howard, *Captain Professor: A Life in War and Peace* (London: Continuum, 2006), 125.

¹¹¹ Ian Fletcher had access to these papers at some point between the first and second editions of Johnson’s poems, and makes some use of them in his revised introduction, though claiming that he no longer knew their whereabouts. Details of Earle’s death taken from ‘Obituaries’, *The Wykehamist*, 1278 (8 November, 1979), 340, and corroborated by private conversation with a family member.

formal biographical gap has, to some extent now been filled by Richard Whittington-Egan's *Lionel Johnson: Victorian Dark Angel* (2012).¹¹² This dearth means that early criticism was forced to rely upon gossip and memoir to an unusual extent even for this anecdote-laden period. In this regard, Johnson has been unlucky in his biographers. But the degree to which that early gossip and memoir was itself driven by impulses other than the biographical seems less to do with luck, and more to do with the reaction of the early twentieth century to the late nineteenth-century discourse of productive sexual continence discussed here. From the very beginning the 'mythic' Johnson was caught up in changing attitudes towards sex, especially as such changes moulded the twentieth-century interpretation and representation of 1890s 'Decadence'.

As reminiscence of the late Victorian period became a genre in its own right in the early twentieth century, memoirists found in Johnson's continent sexuality and untimely death a means by which to exercise a version of what Foucault has called the 'repressive hypothesis', in which the dangerously repressed sexuality of the Victorian period is taken to explain the short, violent, and unhealthy outburst of decadence.¹¹³ The very ferocity of the haemorrhage in Johnson's brain, as well as the supposed incapacity of his frame and nervous system to receive the shock, allowed him to become a symbol for a particular type of decadence, the type that was attracted to 'dissolution', but caught within a 'Victorian' oscillation between sexual repression and violent eruption. Johnson's valuation of sexual continence, his youthful appearance, and his alcoholism, all increased his suitability to this narrative. The

¹¹² This does not, however, take into account material held at Loras College, Dubuque, Iowa (which I have consulted). Raymond Roseliep gathered this material in preparation for a biography that never materialized, and donated it to the college, where he had studied and taught, upon his death.

¹¹³ See Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998; this translation first published 1978; first published in French as *La volonté de savoir*, 1976), 10.

efforts of some friends, mostly Catholic ones like Louise Guiney and Katharine Tynan, to counteract decadent representations by playing up his virtues only fanned the fire. George Santayana wrote: 'I know that an effort has been made to represent him as a saint, hushing the sad reality'.¹¹⁴ The more he was represented as a saint, the more that 'reality' was represented by others as 'sad'. As Osbert Burdett has it, he was 'typical of the characteristic antithesis that divided the energies of the time'.¹¹⁵

Another change in the representation of sexuality to which both Johnson and Victorian Decadence in general were subject was the association of sexuality with 'humanity', and sexual continence with 'inhumanity' (a connection that will be found with George Moore, cf. 259). This idea was by no means new, but certainly became newly dominant at the turn of the century. Its application to Johnson obscured his own association of sexual continence with a widely sympathetic humanism. It became common to represent Johnson as either entirely without sexuality, and thus inhuman and inhumane, or else sexually repressed, and thus dangerously denying his own humanity. Ernest Rhys writes that 'physically he seemed to be the least sensual of his kind', while Edgar Jepson declares: 'I doubt that he ever desired a woman in his life, and if he did, it stopped at desire'.¹¹⁶ Jepson's doubt came not from intimate knowledge of Johnson, whom he knew at Oxford, but from a general impression of his behaviour and writing; 'I have never met anyone more austere', he writes, 'so little touched by the lust of the flesh'.¹¹⁷ Cornelius Weygandt, who knew Johnson only from afar, wrote in 1905 that 'in body Lionel Johnson was never more than a

¹¹⁴ George Santayana, *The Middle Span in People and Places: The Autobiography in One Volume*, ed. Daniel Cory (New York: Scribner, 1963; first published 1944-53; this volume first published 1945), 57.

¹¹⁵ Osbert Burdett, *The Beardsley Period: An Essay in Perspective* (London: John Lane, 1925), 179.

¹¹⁶ Ernest Rhys, *Everyman Remembers* (London: J. M. Dent, 1931), 112; Edgar Jepson, *Memories of a Victorian* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1933), 213.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*

child'.¹¹⁸ There are many reports of Johnson's childlike appearance, including a story that Gosse, on first meeting Johnson, mistook him for a friend of his son's and enquired whether he wouldn't like to play in the garden.¹¹⁹ It seems likely that these accounts were slightly exaggerated after his death: his post-mortem report states that he was 5 foot 3 inches, certainly small but hardly childlike.¹²⁰

More importantly, however, Weygandt finds in this apparent underdevelopment a way of explaining a certain lack of compromise that he finds and objects to in Johnson's writing: 'there is, I think, something of that hardness of heart and narrowness of sympathy which lack of knowledge of the world preserves in children'.¹²¹ Sex here stands in for humane feeling, implying that 'sympathy' requires knowledge and experience of human sensuality. This relation of Johnson's sexuality to his 'humanity' was compounded by Yeats, who also used this notion of sexless inhumanity to define more generally the decadence of his 'tragic generation'. While acknowledging his immense debt, both personal and artistic, to Johnson, Yeats consistently represented him as 'inhumane', and often connected this failing to his lack of sexuality. Johnson, Yeats wrote, 'hated all thoughts of sex', something 'he knew nothing of'.¹²² In the draft of his memoirs, written between 1908 and 1918, Yeats had made the surprising assertion that 'Johnson had refused rather than failed to live, and when an autopsy followed his accidental death during intoxication it was found that in him the man's brain was united to a body where the other organs were undeveloped, the body of a child'.¹²³ The actual report again does not corroborate this claim, made further unlikely by testimony from both Victor Plarr and Johnson himself

¹¹⁸ Cornelius Weygandt, *Tuesdays at Ten: A Garnering from the Talks of Thirty Years on Poets, Dramatists, and Essayists* (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1928), 72.

¹¹⁹ Rhys, *Everyman Remembers*, 112.

¹²⁰ Post-mortem report for Lionel Johnson (cf. 149n[1]).

¹²¹ Weygandt, *Tuesdays at Ten*, 72.

¹²² W. B. Yeats, *Memoirs*, ed. Denis Donoghue (London: Macmillan, 1972), 36, 94.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 97.

that, in his last illnesses, his inability to shave while his hands were swollen from gout meant that he was ‘bearded like a patriarch’.¹²⁴ In the published version Yeats retains this account, but makes its implications more explicitly sexual, saying of Ernest Dowson (a fellow member of the Rhymers’ Club) that ‘unlike Johnson, who, at the autopsy after his death, was discovered never to have grown, except in the brain, after his fifteenth year, he (i.e. Dowson) was full of sexual desire’.¹²⁵ Presumably we are to understand that Johnson’s lack of ‘growth’ precludes sexual desire. He then goes on to use Johnson’s apparently sexless underdevelopment to symbolize both his inhumanity, and the inhumanity of 1890s decadence. That there was another way of understanding Johnson’s sexuality is evidenced by Louise Imogen Guiney’s reading. Guiney, of whom Katharine Tynan said, ‘I believe that like her beloved Lionel Johnson she was a born celibate’, wrote of Johnson that ‘he saw the uses of repression, if his calling was to be not dilettante impulse, but the sustained and unwasted passion of a lifetime’.¹²⁶ Yet it is Yeats’s narrative that has had its legacy in literary criticism.¹²⁷

As Gary Paterson, author of the only full-length monograph on Johnson’s work, writes, ‘the sexual life of Johnson ultimately remains largely a matter of unsubstantiated conjecture’.¹²⁸ The manner in which his sexuality has been represented, however, in both memoir and criticism, is illustrative of the extent to which ideas about sexuality have constituted a great part of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century interpretation of 1890s culture and literature. Whatever his actual sexual

¹²⁴ Letter to Katharine Tynan, 8 October 1901 (cf. 181n[71]); Victor Plarr, *Ernest Dowson 1888-1897: Reminiscences, Unpublished Letters and Marginalia* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1914), 122-23.

¹²⁵ Yeats, *Autobiographies*, 240.

¹²⁶ Katharine Tynan, *Memories* (London: Eveleigh Nash & Grayson, 1924), 136; [Louise Imogen Guiney], ‘Of Lionel Johnson: 1867-1902’, *The Month*, 461 (November, 1902), 460-69.

¹²⁷ See Sarah Green, ‘The Undeveloped Body of Lionel Johnson’, *Notes and Queries*, 63:2 (June, 2016), 281-83.

¹²⁸ Gary H. Paterson, *At the Heart of the 1890s: Essays on Lionel Johnson* (New York: AMS Press, 2008), 126.

behaviour, Johnson's representations of sexuality throughout his life place him in a tradition of late nineteenth-century continent Aestheticism.

Chapter Four

‘An Ascetic Epicureanism’: Vernon Lee

As for Pater and for Johnson, sex has featured a great deal in the recent revival of critical interest in Vernon Lee.¹ Following Burdett Gardener’s pathologizing and psychoanalytical reading of Lee’s ‘lesbian imagination’ (1987), critics both amenable and hostile towards Gardener’s wider thesis have read both Lee’s life and work ‘suspiciously’, and found both to be fraught with sexual desire.² The life has been portrayed as a tale of dissident, probably frustrated passion for members of her own sex, and the writing as the covert expression of this passion. As Jo Briggs put it in 2006, ‘recent secondary literature on Lee’s writing on aesthetics could be said to function as an ever more elaborate and complex “outing” of Lee’s lesbian sexuality’.³ The last ten years have continued in this vein, with controversy hinging less on the fact of Lee’s dissident sexuality, than on its degree and nature. An uneasy consensus has been reached concerning the ‘inactive’ nature of Lee’s relationships with women, particularly Mary Robinson and Clementina (Kit) Anstruther-Thompson. ‘The most striking thing about extant representations of Lee’s sexuality’, writes Sally Newman, ‘is the consistency with which they describe her as a “failed lesbian”’.⁴ To ‘fail’ as a lesbian can mean in this context anything from not engaging in sexual acts to not acknowledging to oneself the nature of one’s desire. There are exceptions; Martha

¹ Though ‘Vernon Lee’ was the pseudonym of Violet Paget, she was often known by the assumed name in both her public and private life. I use ‘Vernon Lee’ throughout this chapter in accordance with my focus on her public utterances rather than personal life or psychology.

² Burdett Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination (Victorian Style): A Psychological and Critical Study of ‘Vernon Lee’* (New York: Garland, 1987; written 1954).

³ Jo Briggs, ‘Plural Anomalies: Gender and Sexuality in Bio-Critical Readings of Vernon Lee’, in *Vernon Lee: Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*, eds Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 160-73; 161.

⁴ Sally Newman, ‘The Archival Traces of Desire: Vernon Lee’s Failed Sexuality and the Interpretation of Letters in Lesbian History’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 14:1/2 (January-April, 2005), 51-75; 55.

Vicinus, for example, has represented Lee's relationships as consciously sexual, whether or not genital-based sex acts took place.⁵ But the vast majority of critics have followed Gardener in reading into Lee's work and life a physically 'inactive' sexuality. Lee was, it is almost universally agreed, 'a woman in denial about her "true" sexuality': a case of either conscious sexual suppression or unconscious repression.⁶

Across the range of critical responses to Lee, as in the present study, one assumption held in common has been that of a significant connection between her work on aesthetics, and matters of sexuality. This association began not long after her death, with statements from Irene Cooper-Willis, her erstwhile friend (they had fallen out before Lee's death). 'Vernon was homosexual', Gardner reports her as saying, 'but she never faced up to sexual facts. She was perfectly pure [...]. She had a whole series of passions for women, but they were all perfectly correct'. In a manuscript analysis of Lee's personality deposited in Colby College Library she concludes, employing a quasi-Freudian psychology, that 'Vernon Lee's absorption in psychological aesthetics must have been some kind of sex sublimation'.⁷ Much recent critical engagement with Lee has expanded on this association, especially work coming from critics who read the late nineteenth-century British Aesthetic Movement as in some measure what Kathy Psomiades has called a 'liberatory homo-apologetic aestheticism'.⁸ In this tradition Lee has been read as having used her writing, especially her essays on aesthetics and her fiction, to explore the dissident sexuality that she was prevented by social pressure from expressing in her life, and at the same

⁵ See Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 143-70.

⁶ Newman, 'The Archival Traces of Desire', 55.

⁷ Irene Cooper-Willis quoted in Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination*, 85, 226.

⁸ Kathy Alexis Psomiades, "'Still Burning from this Strangling Embrace": Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics', in *Victorian Sexual Dissidence*, ed. Richard Dellamora (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 21-42; 21.

time to advocate radical sexual politics. Psomiades, for example, reads her as having ‘produced a sexually dissident lesbian aesthetics’, and Stefano Evangelista has described her as both engaging with and, as a woman, reacting against a predominantly masculine and sexually dissident Aestheticism ‘in which the aesthetic ideal was created through a process of cultural-erotic negotiation between men’. Diana Maltz reads the psychological aesthetics of Lee and Anstruther-Thomson as ‘a lively, liberatory forum for an aristocratic elite’; and Catherine Anne Wiley has wondered if ‘the excesses of her prose’ constitute an intentional ‘violation upon the innocence of her readers’.⁹

While I fully agree with this association between Lee’s aestheticism and her representation of sexuality – though I make no claims about her actual sexuality, active or otherwise – I would like to suggest a different critical approach to this relationship. Whether represented as intentional on her part or not, ‘sex’ in Lee’s work has commonly been characterized as working obliquely, needing to be carefully teased out of and detangled from her excessively voluminous writings, or even read into that excess itself.¹⁰ Comparatively little attention has been given to the explicit statements that Lee made concerning sex and sexuality, and the place that these statements hold in her lifelong theorizing about life, art and social morality. As Briggs says, sexualized readings of Lee so far ‘have been at the expense of a coherent picture

⁹ *Ibid.*, 37; Stefano Evangelista, ‘Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism’, in *Vernon Lee*, eds Maxwell and Pulham, 91-111, 92; Diana Maltz, ‘Engaging “Delicate Brains”: From Working-Class Enculturation to Upper-Class Lesbian Liberation in Vernon Lee and Kit Anstruther-Thomson’s Psychological Aesthetics’, in *Women and British Aestheticism*, eds Talia Schaffer and Kathy Alexis Psomiades (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1999), 211-32, 213; Catherine Anne Wiley, “‘Warming Me Like a Cordial’: The Ethos of the Body in Vernon Lee’s Aesthetics”, in *Vernon Lee*, eds Maxwell and Pulham, 58-74, 73.

¹⁰ See Psomiades, ‘Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics’; Ardel Haefele-Thomas, *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic: Transgressing Monstrosity* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2012), 120-148; Patricia Pulham, ‘The Castrato and the Cry in Vernon Lee’s Wicked Voices’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 30:2 (January, 2002), 421-37, and ‘Duality and Desire in *Louis Norbert*’, in *Vernon Lee*, eds Maxwell and Pulham, 123-42; Margaret Stetz, ‘The Snake Lady and the Bruised Bodley Head: Vernon Lee and Oscar Wilde in the Yellow Book’, in *ibid.*, 112-22; Wiley, ‘The Ethos of the Body’.

of Lee's literary output', focusing on isolated aspects of Lee's writing rather than the place of those elements in the whole, as part of what Alex Wong calls her 'structures of thought'.¹¹ As well as fiction, Lee wrote essays and dialogues engaging not only in aesthetic, but also in moral and political theory. Explicit statements concerning sex are common in her early (pre-1900) work, perhaps surprisingly so for a writer who, though publishing under a male pseudonym, was widely known to be a young woman (though she was certainly not alone in her outspokenness at this time, cf. 70). They are also, compared with her thinking on other subjects, relatively unchanging, amounting to a clear, though not always thoroughly consistent, intellectual position on the *limited* role that sex should play in life. It is to this central part played by sex in Lee's overt theory, rather than the details of her life or the between-the-lines of her writing, that this chapter will attend. As in previous chapters, I am here concerned not with the realities of Lee's sexuality, nor with the reconstruction of any 'sexual subtext' or 'encodings of desire',¹² but instead with what has been imagined by Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best as the 'surface' of her texts; that is, the ways in which sex and sexuality are represented in Lee's writing, and the connections and relationships that are explicitly drawn between sex and other aspects of life.

Specifically, I am concerned with the frequent connections drawn by Lee between sexual continence and aesthetics. Stefano Evangelista has identified the large part that Paterian aestheticism played in shaping Lee's interest in 'the relationship between the study of culture and sexual desire'.¹³ But it may not always be necessary to think of that aesthetic tradition, in all of its representatives, as one in which the critic is 'also distinctly a sexual persona who applies the rules for the enjoyment of art

¹¹ Briggs, 'Plural Anomalies', 162; Alex Wong, 'Vernon Lee's Problem with Landor', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 45:2 (June, 2016), 135-56; 137.

¹² Patricia Pulham, 'Duality and Desire in *Louis Norbert*', 123-42; 123, 137.

¹³ Evangelista, 'Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism', 103.

to the erotic sphere', and for whom 'sexual experimentation contributes to the aesthetic *Bildung*'.¹⁴ Lee can instead be understood as writing, like Johnson, from a point at which multiple discourses to which sexual continence is central converge. Though the discourses involved differ slightly from Johnson's case, yet Johnson and Lee share the late nineteenth-century convention of reading sexual continence into Pater's aestheticism, as explored in Chapter Two. 'Lee effectively rewrites Pater's career', writes Evangelista, 'to match her own idea of aestheticism's natural progression into ethics'.¹⁵ It might also be said that in her treatment of Pater she engages with what, in the 1880s and '90s, had become a well-established tradition of valuing Pater's work for its elaboration of an aestheticism which, while not moralizing in the sense of establishing a standard and universal moral code, nevertheless found a basis for communal ethics in an individual *ethos*, a relationship with oneself and one's community that included among its practices an ideal of sexual continence. Lee was, throughout her career, intensely preoccupied with ethics; that is, questions not only of how one should live, but also how one should live beside other people for the good of all. Sexual continence played a large part in her thinking and conclusions. All expressions of an ethical imperative to sexual continence in Lee's work cannot be traced to Pater's influence; but it was largely in Pater that she eventually found legitimization for the continuity that she wished to draw between sexual continence and art. It is in this, as much as other aspects of Aestheticism, that Pater influenced the formation of her mature thinking about art and society.

After the turn of the century a shift can be seen in Lee's work from a negative to a positive treatment of the ethics of sex and love. Lee is far more interested in exploring the complex nature of love relationships (whether between people, or

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

between people are things, nature, artwork etc.) than Pater and Johnson, who take them much for granted. Whereas the early work most commonly uses sexual indulgence, and occasionally even romantic love, simply to illustrate ethical failure, later work tends rather to turn attention to the love relationship in its own right, striving to theorize what a good love relationship might look like. In this chapter, therefore, I give most attention to the early work, briefly indicating how its themes can be understood as developing in Lee's mature, post-1900 thinking. I begin by establishing the properties that Lee constantly associates with sexuality, and its place in her wider thinking, before going on to trace some of the evolutions that take place in her theories about the relationship between sexual continence and art.

Sex

Vernon Lee's robust ethical preoccupations have often been accounted for as a product of early psychological damage. Vineta Colby, referring to Lee's strong moral boundaries and strident manner of arguing for them, writes of 'the burden of Puritanism that Vernon Lee carried with her'.¹⁶ Included in this 'Puritanism' (which incidentally never had a religious inspiration) is Lee's constant assumption not only that sex is bad – bad for health, for social relationships, for the future of humanity – but that this badness is rationally evident. In biographical explanation, Colby proposes a watered-down (or sobered-up) version of Burdett Gardner's thesis that Lee's supposed sexual repression can be explained through the circumstances of her early youth. It is generally agreed that Lee's mother neglected her as a child, being preoccupied instead with her brother Eugene, who was for the majority of Lee's

¹⁶ Vineta Colby, *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 209.

childhood paralysed from the waist down. In Gardner's account this neglect caused major psychological damage, to which all subsequent inhibition, particularly the turning of sexual desire towards women and her inability to express that desire, can be traced. Colby softens the narrative: instead of pathological psychological damage, she suggests neglect certainly, and the lifelong desperate need for affection that goes with it, but also the intellectual influence of a well-read mother who home-schooled and 'indoctrinated' her precocious daughter. Her mother's ideas were taken from 'eclectic reading in eighteenth-century rationalistic philosophy', with the result that 'for all her free thinking she held and instilled in her daughter a rigorous personal morality that permitted of no deviations or compromise'. Within this was, Colby claims, a vigorous anti-marriage stance: 'Mrs Paget was opposed to the whole idea of marriage, confident that she would never have to face the prospect with her own children'.¹⁷

Lee's ethical intuition may well have been strongly influenced by her freethinking mother. Though her initial attraction to continence may well owe something to her upbringing and psychology, yet these explanations are not necessary to understand the part that continence played in her work. Lee's idealizing of sexual continence is central to her theorizing about life, social ethics, and art. Her thinking on these topics is difficult to understand without a sense of their connection to her thinking about sexuality. Further, far from an old-fashioned survival of eighteenth-century rhetoric, or indeed a kneejerk psychological impulse, Lee's manner of using the idea of sexual continence to reconcile aesthetics and ethics lies comfortably within the sexually continent aesthetic tradition described in this thesis. The similarity between the rhetoric and logic that she employs in effecting this reconciliation, and that used in other late nineteenth-century discourses, particularly that of upper-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 280, 4, 125

middle-class 'progressive' British thinking on sexuality, is extensive enough to have been evident to contemporary readers.

One of the most detailed statements about sexuality in Lee's work can be found at the end of *Belcaro* (1884), an early collection of essays on aesthetics that ends with the first of her published dialogues, 'A Dialogue on Poetic Morality'. This piece sees the first appearance of Baldwin, a fictitious interlocutor who became the star of the collection of dialogues *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (1886) and to a lesser extent of the similar *Althea: Dialogues in Aspiration and Duties* (1894). Baldwin can hardly be taken as an uncomplicated avatar for Lee, but he is a tool for the expression of and working out of hypotheses, deployed in order to voice and test opinions for which, under her own name or even pseudonym, she would have felt compelled to acknowledge caveats and mediations brought by various circumstances. Though she admits in the preface to *Baldwin* that, 'If I am pushed into a logical corner and compelled to confess the truth, I have to admit the identity between my own ideas and Baldwin's', yet she also describes him as 'better far than I and wiser, but perhaps a little less human'.¹⁸ Nevertheless much of what Baldwin says here is repeated elsewhere in her published work.

In 'A Dialogue on Poetic Morality', Baldwin is in dialogue with Cyril, a young poet whose views echo those of Lee's close friend and possible lover, the poet Mary Robinson, to whom the volume is dedicated.¹⁹ The discussion turns on Cyril's doubt over the moral justification of spending time writing poetry in a suffering world, to which Baldwin replies that the poet not only occupies a morally worthwhile position, but also carries grave moral responsibility. 'You thought poetry morally

¹⁸ Vernon Lee, *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1886), 13, 14. All further references will be to this edition and given in the text.

¹⁹ Mary Robinson published at this time under the name A. Mary F. Robinson, and later as Madame Darmesteter, and Madame Duclaux.

below you', he says; 'are you certain that you are morally up to its level?'²⁰ In the midst of this discussion, Baldwin introduces what he calls 'the ethics of the indecent' (257), ostensibly as a mere illustration, though it takes up the rest of the dialogue, more than a third in total. Throughout this section Baldwin assumes that Cyril – and any other incidental eavesdroppers – will obviously agree that repulsion for active, non-reproductive sexuality separates 'mankind' from 'brutekind'. Literature of the past, he argues, included a great deal of sex not because literature *should* include sex, but because people of the past were 'infinitely less self-conscious, less responsible than now' (258). This is because their inferior intellect can be likened to 'a very primitive system of sewerage', poorly equipped to sift good from bad, healthy from unhealthy. In contrast, more civilized readers will find that, 'in our wanderings through the literature of the past, our feet are for ever stumbling into pools of filth, while our eyes are seeking for the splendid traceries, the gorgeous colours above' (259).

It is taken for granted by the text that nineteenth-century readers will, like Baldwin and Cyril, consider the sexual element in past literature to be 'filth'. That Lee was willing to express similar sentiments without the protection of either dialogue-persona or pseudonym, at least at this point in her life, is evidenced by a letter of 1887, written to her mother to discuss the engagement between Mary Robinson and James Darmesteter, a Frenchman whose physical disability, despite having been acquired after birth, led the Paget family to oppose the marriage on eugenic grounds.²¹ Darmesteter had agreed that the marriage was to be sexually

²⁰ Vernon Lee, 'Dialogue on Poetic Morality', in *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions* (London: W. Satchell & Co, 1881), 229-74; 274. All further references will be to this edition and given in the text.

²¹ This suggests an assent to Lamarckian rather than Darwinian evolution, as Darmesteter's disability was treated by the family as an acquired characteristic that could potentially be passed in some way to offspring.

continent, a point upon which Eugene, Lee's brother, was cynical. Eugene had suggested that a Frenchman who made this promise was probably intending to use contraception, inspiring Lee to write the following:

I have long made up my mind (when reading Miss Clappurton's book I discussed it with Bella Duffy) that the common instinct which rejects all such means of indulging passion without accepting its natural consequences and burdens is perfectly correct. I consider all the French and Mrs. Besaut's practices as an abomination, bringing marriage to the level of prostitution and only opening the door to unnatural wickedness (as indeed is almost statistically proven) of all kinds.²²

In other words, all deliberately non-reproductive sex is not only to be considered as similar to 'prostitution', but also imagined as a kind of gateway drug, leading to more 'unnatural wickedness'. It seems that Lee was in the 1880s reading about and discussing sexual questions with her female friends, as well as being happy to discuss them with her family; and thus she can hardly be thought of as innocent of human sexuality, as Colby has claimed.²³ 'Miss Clappurton' and 'Mrs Besaut' most likely refer to Jane Hume Clapperton and Annie Besant, both of whom were heavily involved in pro-contraception campaigning in the late nineteenth century.²⁴ It is unlikely that her reading was confined to Clapperton and Besant: her phrase 'as indeed is almost statistically proven' suggests an acquaintance, at least, with the other side of the contraception question. Her opinions and the rhetoric in which they are expressed closely match those of many feminist or otherwise 'progressive' writers and sympathizers in late nineteenth-century Britain. Lee must have been very familiar with such progressive discourses, whether through reading, listening to lectures, or in conversation, all of which she would have had plenty of opportunity for during her

²² Letter to Matilda Paget, 27 September 1887, quoted in Gardner, *The Lesbian Imagination*, 190-91.

²³ Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 125.

²⁴ It is unclear whether this misspelling is Lee's own, or a fault in Gardner's transcription.

visits to the Robinsons in England in the 1880s. She would almost certainly also, in the process, have been exposed to the controversy over the healthiness and productivity of sexual continence that also often animated these discussions, as shown in Chapter One.

The 'Dialogue on Poetic Morality' assumes that most of its readers will concur with these opinions of sexuality. As for those who do not agree – Baldwin gives the example of Walt Whitman and 'men who uphold his abominations' – most of these will be doing so, he claims, not because they really *feel* differently, but because of a fault of reasoning, a 'simple logical misconception'; in this case, the false belief that whatever is inevitable, such as sexuality, is natural and therefore desirable (258). (This naturalistic fallacy was certainly used by proponents of liberal sexuality against those who idealized continence in the period.) In response, Baldwin uses what Lee later has him call 'evolutionary morality' to argue that, on the contrary, what is natural and what is desirable are by no means the same thing; rather, mankind has not only developed from the primitive state in which sexuality must be regularly indulged in order to ensure survival of the race, but must be actively encouraged to develop further.²⁵ He says:

There is in Nature a great deal which is foul: in that which men are pleased to call unnatural, because Nature herself chastises it after having produced it: there is in Nature an infinite amount of abominable necessity and abominable possibility, which we have reason and conscience to separate from that which within Nature itself is innocent or holy (265-66).

This manner of thinking about Nature is a result of what Colby calls Lee's 'fundamental optimism' or 'melioristic faith'; her belief that mankind of today has not only evolved but also progressed from mankind of the past, and can and, with human

²⁵ For 'evolutionary morality' see 'Honour and Evolution', in *Baldwin*, 127-84.

effort, will evolve into an even more perfect mankind of the future.²⁶ ‘I believe’, Lee has Baldwin say:

that mankind as it exists, with whatever noble qualities it possesses, has been gradually evolved out of a very inferior sort of mankind or brutekind, and will, I hope, be evolved into a very superior sort of mankind [...]. I believe, in short, that we can improve only by becoming more and more different from the original brutes that we were (267).

Lee often echoes this sentiment in her non-dialectic essays. This model of historical and future development was shared with many of her contemporaries and is again found extensively in progressive and particularly feminist discourse, as Lucy Bland and Sheila Jeffreys have shown.²⁷ It was particularly championed by the same Jane Clapperton whose work Lee claimed to have read and discussed with Bella Duffy. The book she mentions was most likely Clapperton’s *Scientific Meliorism and the Evolution of Happiness* (1885), which described ‘the progressive civilization to which humanity tends’.²⁸

In the ‘Dialogue on Poetic Morality’, Lee is so eager to establish fully the universality of the instinct against sensuality that she risks introducing another favourite theory that could be considered logically discordant with her rationalization of the presence of sexuality in past literature: that anti-sexual feeling is itself natural, as justified by the fact of its having been felt by all civilized people. ‘The world at large’, Baldwin claims, ‘ever since it has had any ideas of good and evil, has had an instinct of immorality in talking of that without which not one of us would exist, that

²⁶ Vineta Colby, *The Singular Anomaly: Women Novelists of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: University of New York Press, 1970), 240, 294.

²⁷ Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism & Sexual Morality, 1885-1914* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), 81-91, and Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality, 1880-1930* (London: Pandora Press, 1985), 27-53.

²⁸ Jane Hume Clapperton, *Scientific Meliorism and the Evolution of Happiness* (London: Kegan Paul and Trench, 1885), ix.

which society sanctions and the church blesses' (261). 'A good half of what people call social convention', he continues, 'is based upon a perfectly correct conception, only mankind has forgotten what that conception was' (263). Sheer continuity, he says, shows that this instinct is natural to us and should be listened to. Havelock Ellis would make a similar argument in 1910: 'the fact that chastity, or asceticism, is a real virtue, with fine uses, becomes evident when we realize that it has flourished at all times, in connection with all kinds of religions and the most various moral codes' (though his use of 'chastity' was very different from that of Lee).²⁹ Such an appeal to moral convention is repeated by Lee at several points in her work, as it was appealed to in the 1887 letter quoted above ('I have long made up my mind [...] that the common instinct [...] is perfectly correct'); and this should be borne in mind by anyone trying to locate her politics on a Left-Right binary. In *Belcaro*, however, the argument from nature seems to clash with Baldwin's contention that sexuality in the past can be explained by appeal to that past's comparatively imperfect stage of development. If the ubiquity of sensuality is not evidence of its desirability, how is it that ubiquitous approval for sexual continence *is* taken to constitute such evidence?

Lee recognizes this problem, and attempts an uneasy reconciliation, based on what she takes to be the obvious fact of the physical dangers of sexuality. *Both* sexuality and continence can, Baldwin contends, be understood as the result of instinct. But the latter can be imagined as having been developed by a more civilized humanity to check the effects of the former, which is left over from mankind's primitive history. This was a common argument even for those who otherwise valued sex highly: German psychologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, for example, though claiming that 'sexual feeling is really the root of all ethics, and no doubt of

²⁹ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 6, *Sex in Relation to Society*, 2nd ed. revised (Philadelphia: F. A Davis, 1921; first published 1910), 145.

aestheticism and religion', nevertheless also asserted that civilization was identifiable for its 'high appreciation of virginity, chastity, modesty, and sexual fidelity', and Freud would similarly associate civilization and sexual discipline in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930).³⁰ In making this argument, Baldwin reveals more detailed assumptions about the inherent dangerousness of sexuality both to the individual and society:

exactly because certain instincts are so essential and indispensable, Nature has made them so powerful and excitable; there is no fear of their being too dormant, but there is fear of their being too active, and the consequences of their excess are so hideously dangerous to Nature herself, so destructive of the higher powers, of all the institutions of humanity; the over-activity of the impulses to which we owe our birth is so ruinous of all that for which we are born, social, domestic, and intellectual good, nay, to physical existence itself, that Nature even has found it necessary to restrain them by a counter-instinct – purity, chastity – such as has not been given us to counteract the other physical instincts, as that of eating, which can at most injure the individual glutton, but not affect the general social order (262).

In Baldwin's opinion (disagreement with which he assumes to be deviation either from logic or health) excessive sexuality is clearly dangerous, even 'ruinous', to an individual's physical health to the point of risking death. This individual danger is, in some unspecified but emphatic way, translated into danger of the whole social fabric.

This is recognizable as the conventional idiom of nineteenth-century sexual health literature as described in Chapter One, and resembles, in its vague, unspecified predictions of all imaginable destruction, not only the melodramatic pamphlets of both purity campaigners and quacks, but also the advice of a significant portion of the mainstream medical profession. Baldwin goes on to say that 'the old intuition, now called conventionalism, which connects indecency with immorality', has been 'entirely justified' by modern science, which has found sex to be exactly as damaging

³⁰ Krafft-Ebing, Richard von, *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to Antipathic Sexual Instinct: A Medico-Forensic Study*, trans. F. J. Rebman, 10th ed. (Chicago: Keener, 1901; originally published in German, 1886), 3, 2.

to individual and social health as conventional morality had always suspected (262). It is important that Lee uses this explicitly medical idiom, so often found in literature addressed primarily to a male audience, only when speaking through a male mouthpiece, as though she were uncomfortable with the gendered bias of a discourse developed out of a particularly *male* model of health (though it had historically been applied to female health too, cf. 46). Elsewhere she avoids medical language, instead formulating less embodied, and so less potentially gendered ways of understanding the relationship between the individual and humanity in general to which the dangers of excessive sexuality are central.

The specific threat that Lee may have seen sexuality posing to ‘the general social order’ can be understood with reference to her ethical reasoning at large, especially the system that she called ‘evolutionary morality’. In a later dialogue, ‘Honour and Evolution’, Baldwin explains the term to a young male undergraduate friend:

For as our physical nature has been evolved by the selection and survival of those physical forms which are in harmony with the greatest number of physical circumstances; so also has our moral nature been evolved by the more and more conscious choice of the motives including consideration for the greatest number of results from our actions, of the motives which, instead of merely enlarging the shapeless and functionless moral polyp-jelly of *ego*, work out, diversify and unify, lick into shape, the complicated moral organism of society, with all its innumerable and wondrously co-ordinated limbs and functions (*Baldwin*, 165-66).

‘Evolutionary morality’, in this definition, not only involves the evolution from a less to a more moral state, but also defines this progress as a movement from the privileging of what is good merely for the individual, to what is good for society at large.

This was a common intellectual move in the latter half of the period. As Regenia Gagnier points out in her study of ‘the relationship of the part to the whole’

at the end of the century, ‘Darwin himself increasingly favoured social cooperation over individualistic struggle, as the means by which *groups* achieved mastery over their habitat’.³¹ Lee differs only in emphasizing the active principle in this process, and therefore each individual’s responsibility to see it through. Althea – like Baldwin a dialectic pawn, supposedly representing the opinions of Kit Anstruther-Thompson, but also often echoing Lee’s non-dialectic writing – envisions, in the dialogue ‘The Use of the Soul’, an ideal and perfectly evolved future, in which societies will consist of ‘communities of individual souls’, and each individual ‘shall recognize duties towards our soul and body, our happiness; because our soul, and body, and happiness do not belong merely to ourselves’.³² This responsibility is like the eugenic duty of those reproducing to ensure their own physical health: the point on which Lee and her family saw James Darmesteter failing. But there is an essential difference: moral health is represented as being transferred, not through sexual reproduction, but rather in all social interactions. ‘There is no life’, Althea says, ‘a man may lead with one or two others which does not spread and affect the life of all and every one; nay, not even the life he leads with his own thoughts’ (234).

Lee expresses similar sentiments concerning the moral responsibility of the individual more directly in the preface to *Juvenilia* (1887), another collection of aesthetic essays from which she was, at this point, attempting to distance herself by framing them as ‘juvenile’ works. This time, instead of the clear meliorist progression towards perfection, Lee represents history as engaged in constant change, not necessarily always for the better. Mankind, she argues, has the power to influence the direction of this change, and ideally to push it constantly towards such progression:

³¹ See Regenia Gagnier, *Individualism, Decadence and Globalization: On the Relationship of the Part to the Whole, 1859-1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 15.

³² Vernon Lee, ‘The Use of the Soul’, in *Althea: Dialogues on Aspirations and Duties* (London: Osgood, McIlvaine & Co, 1894), 267-304; 302, 287. All further references will be to this edition and given in the text.

‘For the whole of all things is ever moving, changing plan and form; and we, its infinitesimal atoms, are determining its movements [...]. The question therefore is, in which direction shall our grain of dust’s weight be thrown?’³³ For Lee, the desired direction is always towards what she calls ‘the ideal’, an image of perfection that, though unreachable in the present at least, she nevertheless, in neo-Platonic fashion, claimed to be resident in everyone, an elaboration on her previous reliance on a core of moral ‘instinct’ in all healthy, civilized people. In the *Belcaro* essay ‘Ruskinism’ she says:

In the soul of all of us exists, oftenest fragmentary and blurred, a plan of harmony and perfection which must serve us as guide in our workings, in our altering and rebuilding of things[.]³⁴

This native idealism must not, she warns, fool us into thinking that any such ideal is to be found in the world: ‘we must not expect that with this plan should coincide the actual arrangements of nature’. Yet it is tempting to deduce that the ideal must have some basis in reality after all, as it is characterized by its plausibility, if not immediate attainability. ‘We must beware’, she warns, ‘lest we use as a map of the earth into which we have been created the map of the heaven which we seek to create’ (206).

Sensuality and non-reproductive sex are therefore not only portrayed as undesirable in Lee’s early work, but this undesirability is thoroughly worked into a general theory of individual and social morality, based in an evolutionary meliorism, that would inform her entire *corpus*. It is seen as evidently dangerous to physical, moral and intellectual health, with this danger being translatable into a larger, social and even racial threat.

³³ Vernon Lee, ‘Introduction: Juvenilia’, in *Juvenilia: Being a Second Series of Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*, 2 vols (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887), vol 1., 1-22; 18. All further references will be to this edition and given in the text.

³⁴ Lee, ‘Ruskinism’, in *Belcaro*, 197-229; 206. All further references will be to this edition and given in the text.

Love

Sexuality beyond reproductive necessity has no place for Lee in the ‘ideal’ life. Love, however, occupies a central position. Her explorations of the means by which the ‘ideal’ can be extracted from what is sensual and therefore worthless mark the beginning of Lee’s efforts to theorize non-sensual, ideal love. The theme of this alliance of sexually continent love with the ideal is explicitly expanded upon in the essay ‘Medieval Love’, published in *Euphorion* (1884). In ‘Ruskinism’ she had implored her readers to recognize both the need for the ideal, and the impurity of the actual world, so that the gap between the two might be acknowledged and human effort be enlisted in the great task of closing it as much as possible in the future. ‘Medieval Love’ enacts this imperative to recognize both the ideal and non-ideal; in looking at chivalric poetry of the Middle Ages, she bravely acknowledges the full part that adultery played in the development of the genre, and the difficulty of sifting the dross left by such a heritage from the beauty it produced, before going on to trace the emergence from this genre of a poetry of ideal love, typified by Dante’s *Vita Nuova*. In the process she makes it clear that the two are, though (like humans and animals) of common origin, nevertheless thoroughly estranged.

‘Adultery’ she calls ‘a very ugly word, which must strike almost like a handful of mud in the face whosoever has approached this subject of medieval love in admiration of its strange delicacy and enthusiasm’.³⁵ This is the ‘filth’ that nineteenth-century readers must face in exploring the literature of the past, and even in

³⁵ Vernon Lee, ‘Medieval Love’, in *Euphorion: Being Studies of the Antique and the Medieval in the Renaissance*, 2nd ed. revised (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1885; first published 1884), 337-431; 353. All further references will be to this edition and given in the text.

examining the lineage of some of the more beautiful sentiments in that of the present: ‘the very feeling which constitutes the virtuous love of modern poets is derived from the illegitimate loves of the Middle Ages’ (374). In contrast to this sexually impure poetry based in adultery, she describes a genre of chivalric poetry stylistically based upon the former, but born of different social conditions, in which a high level of civic involvement among the people has bred a strict sexual morality. This is, she claims, the society of Dante, who inherits the poetic forms of the former, immoral feudal society and renders it moral, separating the vulgar from the beautiful, which happens also to be the morally ideal.

This coincidence between the beautiful and the good is an uneasy point for Lee. In ‘Ruskinism’ she argues that the two were not, as Ruskin had believed, necessarily connected:

A pure state of soul is like a pure state of body: a morbid craving is like a disease; a noble moral attitude is like a noble physical attitude; moral excellence and physical beauty are both the healthy, the perfect; but they are the healthy, the perfect, in two totally different halves of nature, and we perceive and judge them by totally different organisms (*Belcaro*, 208).

Yet she ends that essay by admitting that, while the beautiful was not necessarily the good and the good not necessarily beautiful, there was a likeness in the way in which both operated in human lives that often amounted to an apparent correspondence:

as the moral sense hallows the otherwise egotistic relations of man to man, so also the aesthetic sense hallows the otherwise brutish relations of man to matter; that separately but in harmony, equally but differently, these two faculties make our lives pure and noble (227).

It is this ‘pure and noble’ ideal in life that Dante, in ‘Medieval Love’, is portrayed as filtering out of the soiled poetry of chivalric love:

To prevent such waste of what in itself is pure and precious, is the mission of another country, of another civilization [...] who, receiving the new element of medieval love after it has passed through and been sifted by a number of hands shall cleanse and recreate it in the fire of intellectual and almost abstract passion, producing that wonderful essence of love which, as the juices squeezed by alchemists out of jewels purified the body from all its ills, shall purify away all the diseases of the human soul (*Euphorion*, 389-90).

This saving of what was worthwhile from an otherwise questionable civilization is reminiscent of an ethical-political position described by Lionel Johnson as typical of the humanist tradition, what he called ‘the School of Erasmus’. Erasmus himself, Johnson says, was ‘all for reformation; he detested deformation’:

To fling to the winds the heirlooms and rich heritage of the past because of its rusty incrustations or fungous excrescences, was to him an intolerable lunacy, an exasperating frenzy, of devastation [...]. Purify, elevate, restore, but do not destroy.³⁶

That Johnson saw himself in such a tradition needs hardly be said.

Lee’s use of the word ‘pure’ particularly links her somewhat Platonic ‘ideal’ to sexual continence, though it does not refer *only* to this. Rather, continent love is represented as both an area in which the ideal can potentially be achieved, and a catalyst for other ideal-making efforts:

if the old lust-fattened evil of the world is to diminish rather than to increase, why then every love of man for woman and of woman for man should tend, to the utmost possibility, to resemble that love of the ‘Vita Nuova’ (419).

Such love, plainly sexually continent, ‘a veritable platonic passion’ (397), is constantly referred to by Lee as ‘ideal love’, ‘ideal passion’, which ‘has, in the noblest

³⁶ Lionel Johnson, ‘Erasmus, My Darling’ (first published 1902), in *Post Liminium: Essays and Critical Papers*, ed. Thomas Whitemore (London: Elkin Mathews, 1912), 161-65; 163-64.

of our literature, made the desire of man for woman and of woman for man burn clear towards heaven, leaving behind the noisome ashes and soul-enervating vapours of earthly lust' (339). It is important to note that, despite Lee's having been recognized in recent criticism as a homosexual writer, she is careful here to avoid association with what she most likely knew to be an Oxford tradition of using Plato to justify and idealize male homosexuality. 'Also does there exist', she writes, 'no passion (and Phaedrus is there to prove it) so vile and loathsome as to be unable to weave about itself a glamour of ideal sentiment' (369). In referring to the *Phaedrus*, in which Plato connects his theory of idealized beauty with homosexual desire between boys and men, as 'vile and loathsome', she disassociates herself from fleshly interpretations of Plato, making it clear that hers is the selective idealism formed in the Platonic tradition favoured by Jowett (cf. 81). This does not of course eliminate the possibility of passionate, romantic relationships between women that may now be recognized as 'lesbian'.

'Medieval Love' contains comments on the nature of this ideal continent love, as opposed to 'earthly lust', which anticipate a change of emphasis in her work, from the dangers of sex to the need for love. An ideal love is described as one 'which craves for no union with its object; which seeks merely to see, nay, which is satisfied with mere thinking on the beloved one' (338). She contends that 'in brief, love should increase, instead, like that which oftenest profanes love's name, of diminishing, the power of aspiration, of self-direction, of self-restraint, which may exist within us' (420). This sounds very much like Pater's distinction, in the unpublished sections of *Gaston de Latour* – the themes of which he could well have discussed with Lee in the 1880s, though he did not begin to write it till late in that decade – between destructive

and 'kindly' love, as well as his explicit connection of the latter with sexual continence (cf. 131).

Lee's later work increasingly focuses on the need in the world for a love both of people and things, which does not seek to possess its object, but rather appreciates its object in a detached, disinterested fashion. This new emphasis begins in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895), with the essay 'Love of the Saints', in which she reconsiders the historical and aesthetic developments explored in 'Medieval Love'. Where the earlier essay had focused, somewhat negatively, on the 'evil' lineage of spiritual love in adultery, the latter attends to the good brought into the world by the new insistence on human love, acknowledging but downplaying the attendant immorality. The distinction is instead between different kinds of continence. The antecedent focused upon is Christian asceticism of the eleventh-century rather than courtly adultery (though the latter is given a nod in the form of 'the worldly love poetry of these often foolish and unwholesome German chivalrous poets'). This asceticism, in valuing virginity for its own sake rather than for the spiritual state it fosters, is shown to waste the human affection and love that can be found mixed with lust in worldly, fleshly poetry.³⁷ It is as if she were worried that her previous essay could be read as an advocacy of continence as a good in its own right, rather than as part of a good life. Thus she complains of eleventh-century asceticism:

Chastity [...] becomes in this fashion that mere guarding of virginity which, for some occult reason, is highly prized in Heaven; as to clean living being indispensable for bearable human relations, which even the ascetic ancients recognised so clearly, there is never an inkling of that (15-16).

³⁷ Vernon Lee, 'Love of the Saints', in *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: Being a Sequel to Euphorion* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1895), 1-64; 10. All further references will be to this edition and given in the text.

The justification of ‘clean living’ as that which is ‘indispensable for bearable human relations’ is vital to Lee’s thinking about social relationships. Throughout her early work she scorns monks and nuns whose celibacy is (she opines) part of a general cowardice, or refusal to face, and to contend with, the evil of the world. This selfish withdrawal is antithetical to Lee’s moral system, as it ignores the inevitability of sociability: as Althea says in the dialogue ‘The Use of the Soul’, ‘the spiritual life is no remote region of existence, it is a mode of living’ (*Althea*, 281). Yet that mode of living necessitates that each individual look after his or her health, both of body and soul, and neither is compatible with sexual excess. The ‘clean living’ that Lee advocates is therefore the *only* condition in which civilized social relations can exist, the opposite of a cowardly monasticism. This sociable continence is not only compatible with, but also necessary to a general, humane love:

O love of human creatures, of man for woman, parents and children, of brethren, love of friends; fuel and food, which keeps the soul alive, balm curing its wounds, or, if they be incurable, helps the poor dying thing to die at last in peace (17).

Though she includes heterosexual love here, most often she uses the term ‘loving-kindness’, suggesting a general warmth of feeling more often associated with Christianity. In her subsequent work, such as *Limbo* (1897), *Laurus Nobilis* (1909), *Hortus Vitae* (1903), and *The Handling of Words* (1925), the word ‘love’ refers almost exclusively to an ideal attitude of disinterested appreciation that can be felt toward anything, from people and animals to objects, places, and art works.

Love for Lee, when it has its base in sensuality, is understood as possessive and destructive. But sexually continent love is idealized as disinterested, pure, spiritual and, as we shall see in the next section, ironically more productive even than

reproductive sex. With this understanding of sex and love, we can embark on an exploration of the connections that Lee draws between sexual continence and art.

Art

Lee does not outline an explicit theory about the connection between sexual continence and art; but it is a relationship that her work frequently approaches or assumes. Like the dangers of sexuality, Lee treats this relation as an intuition, a condition of any successful, rational theory of life. One need not resort to her childhood or personal history to account for this. Lee was, from her earliest days, steeped in literature that habitually made this connection, from Carlyle, Thoreau, Emerson and Pater, to the scientific and political literature with which she kept up throughout her life. In this section, I first consider her early understanding of the relation of sense experience to aesthetic pleasure, before examining how the same logic is used to separate sexuality from continent love. That love, I will show, is theorized by Lee as closely related to art, and both to radical social reform, via her concept of ‘the ideal’.

The influence of Pater can be seen in Lee’s care, when considering aesthetic pleasure in *Belcaro*, to separate the sensuous – that is, all sense experience – from the sensual, or sexualized sense experience. ‘The artistic emotions, for instance’, says Baldwin in the last of her published dialogues, ‘The Use of the Soul’ (1894), ‘are incalculably complex compared with the sensual’ (*Althea*, 290). In ‘Ruskinism’, she portrays Ruskin as crippled under the awful question of the legitimacy of seeking aesthetic experience: ‘the question,’ as she puts it, ‘of the legitimacy not of one kind of artistic enjoyment more than another, but of the enjoyment of art at all’ (*Belcaro*,

199). At first she echoes her anticipated reader's dismissal of this nicety: 'many of us may answer with contempt that the thinking men and women of to-day are not ascetics of the Middle Ages, nor utilitarians of the 18th century, nor Scotch Calvinists, that we should require to be taught that beauty is neither sinful nor useless'. Then she not only disagrees that such teaching is unnecessary in the nineteenth century, but also accounts for Ruskin's preoccupation with this question with the secularized circumstances of his day, circumstances that one could argue applied more to the sceptic Lee than the Christian Ruskin:

For, just in proportion as the old religious faith is dying out, we are feeling the necessity to create a new; as the old vocations of belief are becoming fewer and further between, the new vocations of duty are becoming commoner; as the old restrictions of the written law are melting away, so there appears the new restriction of the unwritten law, the law of our emancipated conscience; and the less we go to our priests, the more do we go to our own inner selves to know what we may do and what we should sacrifice: with our daily growing liberty, grows and must grow, to all the nobler among us, our responsibility (199-200).

It is Ruskin's assertion that moral good can be equated with aesthetic good that she scorns, not the questions that he asks.

Indeed, those questions are far from absent in *Belcaro*, though its conclusions are, as Evangelista has pointed out, Paterian rather than Ruskinian.³⁸ I have argued that Pater can be (and was) read as consistently and systematically separating sensuous from sensual experience, legitimizing the former as an essential part of aesthetic pleasure while resisting the latter. Evangelista has described 'Ruskinism' as an essay in which Lee 'picks up the oblique revision of Ruskin made by Pater in *The Renaissance* and voices it with characteristic boldness'.³⁹ This can also be said of

³⁸ Evangelista, 'Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism', 93.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

much of another essay, 'Chapelmanmaster Kreisler: A Study of Musical Romanticists', though there Lee arguably takes Pater's argument one step further by exploring the relationship of the intellect to aesthetic pleasure. In this essay Lee outlines even more explicitly than Pater the difference between sensuous and sensual pleasure within aesthetic experience. Whereas Pater had suggested that the sensuous experience should be restrained in order to prevent it from becoming sensual, Lee argues that something more has to happen for sensuousness to become aesthetic experience. 'Art begins', she says, 'only where the physical elements are subjected to an intellectual process, and it exists completely only where they abdicate their independence and become subservient to an intellectual design' (*Belcaro*, 117).⁴⁰ This does not mean that purely sensual pleasure cannot be got from artistic works, but merely that, where it is got, it does not owe itself to the artistic element in that art work. Again, she is making a distinction between worthwhile and sordid elements in the same object, and theorizing a process of sifting the one from the other. Though she admits that 'music owes its power over the heart to its sensuous elements as given by nature', yet she says that 'music exists as an art, that is to say, as an elaboration of the human mind, only inasmuch as those sensuous brute elements are held in check and measure, are made the slaves of an intellectual conception' (117). Art can, she claims, only be enjoyed *as art* if the sensuous is not only restrained, but also intellectualized. This intellectualization entails extreme control and discipline, rather than rejection of the body. A similar logic is used in the moral sphere in the much later dialogue 'The Spiritual Life', where Baldwin argues that the cultivation of the soul, though 'an aim

⁴⁰ Vernon Lee, 'Chapelmanmaster Kreisler: A Study of Musical Romanticists', in *Belcaro*, 106-28. First published as 'Hoffman's Kreisler: The First of the Musical Romanticists', *Fraser's Magazine*, 98:18 (December, 1878), 767-77.

in itself', is 'a thing for whose perfection the body must be used' (*Althea*, 250).⁴¹ Again, the body and its senses are not rejected, but brought under control and utilized.

As well as generally drawing on a Paterian separation of the sensuous from the sensual in aesthetic pleasure, Lee's expression of the intellectualization of the senses through art not only renders sensuous pleasure safe, but also makes it productive. Her descriptions of this productivity often approach the language of productive retention used by Pater, and by the scientific and political literature that she read. Pater had said in 'Poems by William Morris' that, 'a passion of which the outlets are sealed, begets a tension of nerve, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliance and relief'.⁴² A similar mechanism seems to be suggested in Lee's contention that, in enjoying art, 'it is as we should perceive the power of a tiger chained up behind a grating' (*Belcaro*, 124). There are differences, of course: Pater is, unlike Lee, writing explicitly about art and love, while she is writing about art in relation to sense experience of all kinds. Further, for him the result of retention is a 'tension of nerve' that is by no means healthy, though he can be read as returning to a productively retentive mechanism in a more positive light elsewhere in his work. Lee's transformation of sense experience by the intellect through art, conversely, results not in agitation but detachment, serenity, the state that she throughout her work considered to be indicative of mental health. 'Nature has submitted to man, and has abdicated her power into his hands', she says of this transformation when successful, 'the stormy reign of instinctive feeling has come to an end; the serene reign of art has begun' (122). Lee's metaphor of the chained tiger is more suggestive of retention than her general argument, which bears more resemblance to Johnson's transformational

⁴¹ Vernon Lee, 'The Spiritual Life', in *Althea*, 223-66. First published as 'The Spiritual Life: A Dialogue', *Contemporary Review*, 62 (November, 1892), 663-82.

⁴² [Walter Pater], 'Poems by William Morris', *The Westminster Review*, 34:2 (October, 1868), 300-12; 303.

mechanism, in which art is figured as a site wherein the pleasures of sense experience can be legitimately enjoyed, though his ideal was impassioned continence rather than calm (cf. 177). While Johnson was attracted to this model of processing sex through his Catholic religion, it is tempting to conclude that the sceptic Lee's gender meant that, while a Paterian mechanism of productive retention was attractive to her, yet its similarity to a masculine understanding of bodily health meant that it made less sense as it was reasoned out, leading her to develop a wider, transformational mechanism instead.

'Chapelmaster Kreisler' does not directly refer to sex. But its division between harmful indulgence in pure sensuality and the regenerative experience of intellectualized sensuousness is developed in 'Medieval Love', where its logic is mapped on to the division between sex and love. Lee is there revising Pater's own comments about medieval chivalric literature, given in 'Poems by William Morris' and the first chapter of *The Renaissance*, 'Two Early French Stories' (in the first edition 'Aucassin and Nicolette' [1873]). Pater had, in the earlier essay, focused on the introduction from religious to secular poetry of a love directed towards an unattainable object, thus becoming 'a passion of which the outlets are sealed'.⁴³ In 'Two French Stories', however, he had suggested that the 'profane poetry of the middle age' did express a physical sexuality, describing its spirit as embodied in the passionate love of Abelard for Héloïse (cf. 111). Lee combines these approaches by splitting chivalric poetry into two generations, and characterizing the distinction between them as that of sexual expressiveness and sexual continence. Of the first she writes, 'I conceive it to consist in a certain sentimental, romantic, idealistic attitude towards women, not by any means incompatible however with the grossest

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 303.

animalism' (*Euphorion*, 341-42). This is consistent with her contention, in 'Ruskinism', that one has a responsibility to acknowledge the evil and ugly in the world, especially when it is troublingly mixed with the beautiful. Truth is at least as important as beauty, and the first step towards it is, for her, the appreciation that they are not the same thing. To the first generation of chivalrous poets she attaches the unhealthiness that Pater (somewhat more ambiguously) attributed to the whole, though it is the unhealthiness, not of the over-refined, but of the bestially atavistic, 'the grossest animalism'.

To the latter generation of Dante, on the other hand, she allocates an ideal refinement. She often describes it in a Paterian language of concentration, reminiscent both of that 'tension of nerve', and the infamous 'hard, gem-like flame' of the conclusion to *The Renaissance*. Dante's love for Beatrice is described as a 'white flame of love' that 'burned [...] strangely concentrated and pure' (339). As quoted above, she claims that these newer poets 'shall cleanse and recreate [medieval love] in the fire of intellectual and almost abstract passion, producing that wonderful essence of love which, as the juices squeezed by alchemists out of jewels purified the body from all its ills, shall purify away all the diseases of the human soul' (389). Again, Lee seems to be approaching a mechanism of productive retention, in which what is retained is transformed and intensified, only to shy away from it, avoiding and thus perhaps rising beyond a masculine spermiatic idiom.

Lee describes this refinement not as unhealthy, as it was for Pater, but as healthy because idealizing. She anticipates that her readers will view such a rarefied love with suspicion: as quoted above, she describes 'this ideal love, which craves for no union with its object; which seeks merely to see, nay, which is satisfied with mere

thinking on the beloved one', as one which 'will strike us with the cold and barren glitter of the miraculous'. She continues:

The thought will arise that this purely intellectual love of a scarce-noticed youth for a scarce-known woman is a thing which does not belong to life, neither sweetening nor ennobling any of its real relations; that it is, in its dazzling purity and whiteness, in fact a mere strange and sterile death light, such as could not and should not, in this world of ours, exist twice over (338-39).

Yet she denies that it is either unhealthy or unreal, making it a symbol of the ideal as described in 'Ruskinism', the unnaturalness that is desirable precisely because it is *better* than what is found in nature, created by man:

But could such love as this exist, could it be genuine? To my mind, indubitably. For there is, in all our perceptions and desires of physical and moral beauty, an element of passion which is akin to love; and there is, in all love that is not mere lust, a perception of, a craving for, beauty, real or imaginary, which is identical with our merely aesthetic perceptions and cravings (*Euphorion*, 397).

It is possible, Lee argues, to extract this element of 'passion which is akin to love', to refine it from the sensuality with which it is so often combined, and use what remains to build a more perfect world, just as Dante in order to 'prevent such waste of what in itself is pure and precious', can be understood to 'cleanse and recreate it in the fire of intellectual and almost abstract passion, producing that wonderful essence of love' (*Euphorion*, 389-90). Again Lee is gesturing towards a melioristic faith in the ability of mankind to create a world better than the one it finds.

In justifying the possibility of continent 'love', therefore, Lee connects spiritual 'passion', the idealizing spirit, with aesthetic experience, though her phrase 'merely aesthetic perceptions' indicates her increasing tendency to subjugate art to 'love'. In true Platonic fashion, love 'that is not mere lust' is understood as both 'a

perception of' and 'a craving for' beauty that makes it 'identical with our merely aesthetic perceptions and cravings'. But at this point Lee is careful to prevent this identification from being read as a necessary relationship, specifying that the perception and craving for beauty in itself contains only 'an element of passion *which is akin* to love' [my italics]. Love and art are not therefore necessary to each other; both a creative, idealizing impulse and art itself are found to have produced ideal love. But Lee then describes this production of ideal love as part of the history of art: it was, in her account, during the sifting of what is beautiful from profane love poetry in the twelfth century that the concept of ideal love was initially created: 'platonic love was possible, doubly possible in souls tense with poetic wants; it became a reality through the strength of the wish for it' (399). This linking of idealism and aesthetic creative impulse suggests a radical connection between art and social reform that would become more fully articulated in *Laurus Nobilis* (1909).

Meanwhile, the connection between a spiritual, continent love and art is reworked, more than a decade later, in 'Love of the Saints'. This essay, as we have seen, reassesses the material from 'Medieval Love', but with an emphasis on the cold, barren asceticism of the world from which spiritual love eventually emerges. Again in reaction to Pater, she uses the story of Abelard and Héloïse to illustrate her point, representing Abelard not as the conduit of the renaissance spirit to the world, but as a cold ascetic, who did not know how to respond to the new kind of love that he had inspired in Héloïse. This love, usually referred to, as it was with Johnson, as 'loving-kindness', potentially coexists with fleshly lust (though Lee is always ambivalent about this possibility, liable as she is to consider all lust to be possessive and destructive). But it is also separable from it; it is what romantic love has in common with love between friends or family members, and even the love of people for animals

or objects, such as artworks, a theme later explored in *Hortus Vitae*. This love is wider and more general than that of ‘Medieval Love’, and this time is explicitly said to produce art:

Justice preached by Hebrew prophets, charity and purity taught by Jesus of Nazareth, fortitude recommended by Epictetus and Aurelius, none of these great messages to men necessarily produce that special response which we call Art. But the message of loving joyfulness, of happiness in the world and the world’s creatures, whether men or birds, or sun or moon, – this message, which was that of St. Francis, sets the soul singing; and just such singing of the soul makes art (*Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, 30).

This still does not necessarily mean that all art is produced by love, though love can result in art. Lee rehearses here an assertion that she would make more explicitly in the ‘Valedictory’ to *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*: that art is the produce of ‘surplus energy’ both in a society and in an individual:

Art is the outcome of a surplus of human energy, the expression of a state of vital harmony, striving for and partly realising a yet greater energy, a more complete harmony in one sphere or another of man’s relations with the universe (253).⁴⁴

She describes love as the product of similar excess. Love, she claims in ‘Love of the Saints’, ‘gave to mankind a plenitude of happiness such as is necessary, whether reasonable or unreasonable, for mankind to continue living at all; art, poetry, freedom’ (25).

‘Energy’ is always a somewhat mysterious quantity in Lee’s later work, as it was in the work of many of her contemporaries, and it is unclear in what manner is it related to ‘happiness’. But it becomes particularly important in her work following the introduction of a vitalist discourse of ‘universal life’. This rhetoric first emerges in

⁴⁴ Vernon Lee, ‘Valedictory’, *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, 233-60.

Althea, is expanded upon in the ‘Valedictory’, and is repeated frequently in her early twentieth-century essays. It represents history, art, all intellectual work in fact, as well as spiritualized (i.e. not only continent, but disinterested and unpossessive) love in friendship, as offering access to ‘the life and joy of the universe’ (*Althea*, 251). In the final two dialogues of *Althea*, both Baldwin and Althea represent participation in this universal ‘life’ as a moral imperative:

We must direct the bulk of our vital sap upon such parts of us as transcend the mere necessities of our physical continuance, or our half-physical social comfort; on that which is over and above, which needs to grow, and whose complete development is a sort of ideal of perfection for us all, the something in which alone there is room and shelter for the greatest happiness of all (*Althea*, 249).

In doing so, Baldwin says, people can ‘increase their points of contact with the rest of Nature, and live in a greater number of its processes; becoming, through sympathy and dutiful activity, not merely men, but limbs of the bigger man, Humanity’ (265).

Such vitalist rhetoric is often found together with a liberatory sexual politics at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, with sex described as one thing that connects all things in the universe. As Anne Fernihough notes ‘vitalism was such a powerful discourse amongst Edwardian radicals that it impacted upon almost every topic’, including sex.⁴⁵ This combination was shared by George Moore, and would be seen later in D. H. Lawrence among others. Yet for Lee, as for Pater and Johnson, such contact with a wider life is necessarily sexually continent, as she increasingly connects the sensual and even the sensuous with the life of the particular, individual ego, and that of the ‘spirit’, a quantity that includes but transcends what she earlier called ‘intellect’, with the general, universal ‘life’. Much

⁴⁵ See Anne Fernihough, *Freewomen and Supermen: Edwardian Radicals and Literary Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 25.

as Pater in *Marius* had grouped together the selfish, the sensual, and the worldly, so Baldwin denigrates ‘great minds who systematically cultivate their ego, and decline responsibilities towards other egos’, regretting, ‘their very gratuitous assumption that [the world] was created solely for their individual delectation; or, rather, for the delectation solely of their individual nerves, palate, sex, eyes, ears and vanity’ (241). Rather, he says, ‘by the spirit only, by thought and feeling, can the life of one individual be welded with that of others; and only such real union as this can be fruitful of good’ (257). Such spiritual union can be achieved in true friendship, but also through history and art: it is ‘the special, the essential use of all art and all poetry’ (241).

For Lee, then, ideal art is closely bound up with sexual continence: firstly by a conception of ‘the ideal’ that values the body only when spiritualized, though it is no less the body for that process (it is this persistent embodiment, for example, that allowed her to develop a system of embodied psychological aesthetics along with Kit Anstruther-Thompson); and secondly by a moral system and concept of the universe that places this ‘ideal’ at the centre of all human happiness and progress. In a later essay, ‘The Use of Beauty’, aesthetic pleasure would be described as ‘a mysteriously ennobling quality’, an ethical force in its own right, as it provides a mental and moral discipline in which lower pleasures are gradually eschewed for the higher: a process which she cites Pater as having taught in *Marius* and *Plato and Platonism*.⁴⁶

As we have so far examined it, however, this relationship between art and sexual continence is strangely divorced from the figure of the artist herself. Art is found to function in social and general ‘life’ in a similar way to sexual continence, and both become part of the one’s relationship with oneself that is also integral to

⁴⁶ Vernon Lee, ‘The Use of Beauty’, in *Laurus Nobilis: Chapters on Art and Life* (London: John Lane, 1909), 1-40; 11-12, 22, 33-34.

one's relationship with others; but we have seen little about the actual production of art as an individual practice. In the next section, I show the difficulties that Lee had with the problem of the artist's own (im)morality, and her attempts to overcome these by redefining 'art' and, consequently, what it means to be an 'artist'.

The Artist

In the 'Epilogue' to *Euphorion*, Lee declares that, 'each of these studies of mine brings its own lesson, artistic or ethical, important or unimportant; its lesson of seeking certainty in our moral opinions, beauty in all and whatever our forms of art, spirituality in our love' (441).⁴⁷ But at this point in her career Lee refrains from allowing the relationship between 'beauty' and 'spirituality' to become essential, especially when located in the individual. Though the same person may be found to seek 'beauty in all and whatever our forms of art' and 'spirituality in our love', yet the one does not, at this point at least, necessarily imply the other. This is particularly evident when it comes to the artist. An artist, Lee reluctantly admits, can be sexually profligate and his art nevertheless be beautiful, just as a lover can be spiritual and yet have no aesthetic sense.

In her earlier work, Lee refuses to idealize the artist's personality, a point that is at the centre of the *Belcaro* essay 'In Umbria: A Study in Artistic Personality'. In answer to the questions, 'What are the relations between the character of a work of art and the character of the artist who creates it? To what extent may we infer from the peculiar nature of the one the peculiar nature of the other?' she concludes, 'The artist and the man are not the same: the artist is only part of the man; how much of him,

⁴⁷ Vernon Lee, 'Epilogue', *Euphorion*, 435-48.

depends upon the art in which he is a worker' (*Belcaro*, 176, 77).⁴⁸ It is this rejection of an idealized relation between the life and art of an artist, in which the one is reflected in the other, which constitutes her greatest departure from Pater in her early work.

This conception of the artist changes as Lee's conception of art changes from a quality that makes up a very limited portion even of the artwork, to something much more nebulous made up of all products of certain impulses identified as aesthetic. At first it makes up part of her radical identification, from *Belcaro* to *Renaissance Fancies and Studies*, of 'art' with pure form. A large portion of *Belcaro* is dedicated to determining the boundaries between what is and is not 'art', a question that she claims is often dealt with unsatisfactorily by contemporary critics. 'I gradually took in the fact that most writers on art were simply substituting psychological or mystic or poetic enjoyment, due to their own literary activities, for the simple artistic enjoyment which was alone and solely afforded by art itself' (*Belcaro*, 11-12). The aesthetic, she insists, must be recognized as a separate category from the psychological, social, or moral, and it is this insistence that leads her, in 'Ruskinism', to assert so strongly the need for the aesthetic and the moral to be considered as similar, but essentially unrelated categories. In 'In Umbria', she applies this logic to the life of the artist, finding that 'the artist is only part of the man' (177). In this model, what she later has Baldwin call the 'domestic arrangements' of the artist can have no impact on their perception and reproduction of beautiful line and colour (*Baldwin*, 268).

But her determination to keep the artist's life and art separate breaks down whenever she considers literature. 'The artist is only part of the man', she had said, but, 'how much of him, depends upon the art in which he is a worker' ('In Umbria',

⁴⁸ Vernon Lee, 'In Umbria: A Study in Artistic Personality', in *Belcaro*, 156-96. First published as 'In Umbria: A Study in Artistic Personality', *Fraser's Magazine*, 103:23 (June, 1881), 800-16.

Belcaro, 177). While ‘there are some arts in which the work is produced by a very small number of faculties’, yet there are ‘others where it requires a very complex machine, which we call a whole individuality’ (179). The most complex art is literary: ‘this universal artist, this artistic organism which contains the whole intensified individual, is the poet’ (187). Of this poet (potentially understandable in the sense of any artist whose medium is words) she admits that ‘if he be impure his writings cannot be actively pure’ (192) (though she does not expand on what it means to be ‘actively’ as opposed to inactively pure). It is revealing, I think, that it is the question of the relation of the poet’s life to his art that first inspires her to write a dialogue, with all its potentials of caveat and ambivalence, as if leaving herself a conspicuous escape route.

In ‘Dialogue on Poetic Morality’ she has Baldwin argue that the artist plays an important social role:

In this world there are two things to be done, and two distinct sets of people to do them: the one work is the destruction of evil, the other the creation of good [...], and this creator of good, as distinguished from destroyer of evil, is, above all other men, the artist (241, 42).

The upshot of this is that ‘a man endowed to be an artist [...] is simply failing in his duty by becoming a practical worker’ (243). The way in which the poet specifically must go about creating good is, however, different from that of the painter, sculpture or musician. Because the poet’s medium is human life, rather than line, colour, or sound, so:

a sense of moral right or wrong is required in his art, as a sense of colour is required in painting. [...] as soon as a poet deals with human beings, and their feelings and doings, he must have a correct sense of what, in such feelings and doings, is right and what is wrong (250).

It is with this in mind that Baldwin launches into his illustration of the treatment in poetry of ‘the ethics of the indecent’, and the greater risk that there is in indecent literature than any other indecent art. Addressed to the moral sense of readers, rather than their ear or eye, sexually immoral literature can act as ‘filthy narcotics, which leave the moral eyes dim, and the moral nerves tremulous, and the moral muscles unstrung’ (269). The poet ‘is the artist who, if he blunders, does not merely fatigue a nerve, or paralyze for a moment a physical sense, but injures the whole texture of our sympathies and deafens our conscience’ (274).

Lee is careful to have Baldwin specify that ‘I do not think that the poet’s object is to moralize mankind’. He says, ‘I think that the materials with which he must work are such that, while practising his art, he may unconsciously do more mischief than all the professed moralists in Christendom can consciously do good’. The metaphor used to illustrate this responsibility, of the poet carrying ‘in his moral arms the soul of the reader’ across the ‘soft, sinking soil (soft with filthy bogs)’ of the human soul (273), resembles one in *Marius the Epicurean*, where Marius’s mother bids him consider his soul as ‘a white bird [...] which he must carry in his bosom across a crowded public place’ (though *Belcaro* was published a year before *Marius*).⁴⁹ But still she refrains from addressing the problem of whether or not poets’ actual conduct or sexual practice (as opposed to their inherent moral character, which she does discuss) can affect their art; more specifically whether, among other things, the poet need be sexually continent outside the functions of procreation. Lee does not, here or elsewhere, describe the body of the individual artist, whether working to a mechanism of productive retention or otherwise; where the rhetoric of that

⁴⁹ Walter Pater, *Marius the Epicurean: his Sensations and Ideas*, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1910; first published 1885), vol. 1, 22.

mechanism is employed, it is always in the relatively abstract manner, and does not imply or necessitate a bodily practice on the part of the artist. Again, it seems likely that Lee's gender made application of this logic to specific sexual bodily practice less attractive. The uncertainty is therefore always whether the moral implications of art, and especially literary art, mean that the artist himself must be moral, and among other things sexually continent.

The question of the moral efficacy of literary art is next confronted in *Baldwin*, and the dialogue 'On Novels'. Again, she holds off on the question of whether a literary artist has a responsibility to live in a certain way, but she does have Baldwin expand further on the moral responsibility of the literary artist, again with particular reference to sexual morality. Here he asserts that literary arts are, because of their moral content, 'only half-arts' (205), but are not therefore of any less value:

While fiction – let us say at once, the novel – falls short of absolute achievement on one side, it is able to achieve much more, something quite unknown to the rest of the arts, on the other; and while it evades some of the laws of the merely aesthetical, it becomes liable to another set of necessities, the necessities of ethics (207).⁵⁰

Her reassessment of the relative importance of art and morality anticipates the preface to *Juvenilia* (1887), in which she outlines these ideas without the intercession of Baldwin. There she draws a distinction between 'the serious interests of the soul' and 'its mere pleasant pastimes', claiming to have realized, in the process of maturing, 'the relative values of these things' (5). And, as has been noticed by Stefano Evangelista and by Laurel Brake, she does so with reference to Walter Pater, and *Marius the Epicurean* in particular. But this preface need not be read, as by Brake, as

⁵⁰ Vernon Lee, 'On Novels', in *Baldwin*, 185-246. First published as 'A Dialogue on Novels', *Contemporary Review*, 48 (September, 1885), 378-40.

‘hostile’ to Pater.⁵¹ Though Lee does say that *Marius* is ‘sunny, serene, bracing, like those first spring days’ with ‘its principal figure, harmonious and strong and chaste like the statue of some high-born boy priest’, constituting ‘the morality of the youth of such of us as are best’, yet she also describes an act of re-reading: ‘Unfortunately, it is delusive, and when we come to read “Marius” a second time we feel a certain sadness, of which the book is the seemingly serene result’ (8, 9). Though she is gently critical of what in *Marius* echoes *The Renaissance*, with its ‘bracing’, art-centric philosophy, yet she suggests that Pater too realized the limitations of this aestheticism, and wrote *Marius* as a reassessment. She therefore portrays her thought as following rather than overtaking Pater, though she does, characteristically, state explicitly a principle that Pater may at best be thought to approach tentatively: namely, that social morality is ultimately more important than individual aesthetic satisfaction. Where Johnson had been willing to assign equal weight to these concerns, Lee goes a step further in explicitly valuing social responsibility above art. The question of the novel’s non-aesthetic and yet highly valued content would continue to form the crux of her thinking on that genre, especially in *The Handling of Words*.⁵²

The issue of the artist’s personal morality is resolved, though uneasily, in the ‘Valedictory’ of *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895). There she begins to alter her understanding of what ‘art’ consists of, moving beyond the definition of art as form, to a much wider categorization. Again, its impersonality is stressed: ‘Art is a much greater and more cosmic thing than the mere expression of man’s thoughts or opinions on any one subject’. But instead of interpreting this impersonality as

⁵¹ Laurel Brake, ‘Vernon Lee and the Pater Circle’, in *Vernon Lee*, eds Maxwell and Pulham, 40-57, 41; Evangelista, ‘Vernon Lee and the Gender of Aestheticism’, 104.

⁵² See especially Vernon Lee, ‘The Aesthetics of the Novel’, in *The Handling of Words and Other Studies in Literary Psychology* (London: John Lane, 1923), 66-72.

isolating art from all other considerations, preserving it in a separate, aesthetic sphere, she posits art as a connection between the individual and ‘the universal life’: ‘Art is the expression of man’s life, of his mode of being, of his relations with the universe, since it is, in fact, man’s inarticulate answer to the universe’s unspoken message’ (253).

The exact relationship between art, the individual, and ‘the universe’, and whether this ‘universe’ is to be understood as entirely human or containing the inhuman, is unclear. But this vague vitalist idiom allows her finally to justify an ideal morality in the life of the artist, without needing to evolve a firm logic for it. And she does so, again, through Pater. ‘Thoughts such as these’, she says:

bring with them the memory of the master we have recently lost, of the master who, in the midst of aesthetical anarchy, taught us once more, and with subtle and solemn efficacy, the old Platonic and Goethian doctrine of the affinity between artistic beauty and human worthiness (255).

The Goethean word ‘affinity’ is useful for her here, implying relationship without committing to causality or necessity. She goes on to describe Pater’s career trajectory in remarkably Platonic, and also melioristic terms:

By faithful and self-restraining cultivation of the sense of harmony, he appears to have risen from the perception of visible beauty to the knowledge of beauty of the spiritual kind, both being expressions of the same perfect fittingness to an ever more intense and various and congruous life (255-56).

Vitalism allows her to move beyond the coincidental relationship that, in ‘Ruskinism’, she had drawn between physical and moral beauty, to something approaching a necessary connection based in the ‘universal’ quality of ‘harmony’. This word reminds one that she had, a couple of pages previously, defined art as ‘the expression

of a state of vital harmony, striving for and partly realising a yet greater energy, a more complete harmony in one sphere or another of man's relations with the universe' (253).

And she does not finish here. She next finds in *The Renaissance*, which she values less than Pater's later work, 'a sense of caducity and barrenness, due to the intuition of all sane persons that only an active synthesis of preferences and repulsions, what we imply in the terms *character* and *moral*, can have real importance in life, affinity with life – be, in short, vital' (256). *The Renaissance* failed, in other words, because it did not clearly enough recognize the 'affinity' between moral and physical beauty; though she does admit that 'even in this earliest book, examined retrospectively, it is easy to find the characteristic germ of what will develop' (257): a view of Pater's work that would later be developed by William Shuter.⁵³ Pater moved beyond this initial narrowness, she claims, precisely because he came to realize the true value of moral as well as physical beauty, and subsequently treated life in the manner of art:

his conception of art, being the outcome of his whole personal mode of existence, was inevitably one of art, not for art's sake, but of art for the sake of life – art as one of the harmonious functions of existence (259).

She refers to this affinity or 'harmony' between the physical and spiritual as the 'functional unity' of 'life' and the 'universe', a fact of which she supposes Pater must have been aware:

Surely to the intuition of this artist and thinker, the fundamental unity – the unity between man's relations with external nature, with his own thoughts and with others' feelings – stood revealed as the secret of the highest aesthetics

⁵³ William F. Shuter, *Rereading Walter Pater* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), *passim*.

[...]. For art and thought arise from life; and to life, as principle of harmony, they must return (259-60).

And though it is still unclear how this ‘harmony’ functions, she can now exploit this almost mystical vagueness to suggest a more meaningful relationship between physical and moral health and beauty; in particular, ‘the connection which we all feel between physical sanity and purity and the moral qualities called by the same names’ (257). Weight can finally be given to the feeling, again theorized as a near-universal intuition, that sexual continence is actually related to, rather than simply similar to, aesthetic beauty.

In the volumes of essays that followed *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* – *Limbo*, *Hortus Vitae*, and *Laurus Nobilis* – Lee wholeheartedly embraces what she sees as Pater’s conception of art as the ‘outcome’ of a ‘whole personal mode of existence’, whether or not an artwork is actually produced. The result is that she can demand ‘spirituality’ in life on aesthetic as well as moral grounds. It is still possible, within this newly expanded system, to imagine a profligate artist producing beautiful art: but increasingly a moral life and successful art are being tied together, becoming part of a unified effort towards the ideal in which there is ever less room for the sexual artist.

Coda: The Fiction

It is less difficult than recent criticism suggests to read Vernon Lee’s fiction as the product of similar thinking about sexuality and aesthetics as her non-fiction. In 1884 she published *Miss Brown*, a novel that explored the physical and moral unhealthiness

of the English Aesthetic culture of the time.⁵⁴ The relatively simple plot of *Miss Brown* conceals a surprisingly complex, often perplexing survey of the points of connection between gender, aesthetics, social morality and sexuality. In the process Lee forcibly identified what she deemed English Aestheticism's failure (not, it must be asserted, that of aestheticism in general) with sexual immorality. This aspect of the novel attracted outraged attention on publication, and has continued to dominate readings since. She described this sexual immorality, and her protagonist Anne Brown's reactions of disgust, so luridly – Henry James referred to her 'intellectual rowdyism of style' – that an anonymous reviewer described her as:

a strong writer overloaded with knowledge, who exaggerates the area of the sexual question in life and who, in long study of early Italian literature and the history of the Renaissance, has lost touch with English feeling, and does not always know what is good to say or leave unsaid.⁵⁵

James also questioned the amount of space she had dedicated in her novel to sex:

you take the aesthetic business too seriously, too tragically, and above all with too great an implication of sexual motives [...], you have impregnated all those people too much with the sexual, the basely erotic preoccupation [...], perhaps you have been too much in a moral passion! That has put certain exaggerations, overstatements, *grossissements*, insistences wanting in tact, into your head.⁵⁶

Others seem to have repeated these criticisms in conversation. In a journal entry for New Year's Eve 1884, Lee wrote:

⁵⁴ Vernon Lee, *Miss Brown: A Novel* (London: Blackwood, 1884).

⁵⁵ Letter from Henry James to Vernon Lee, 10 May 1884, quoted in Peter Gunn, *Vernon Lee: Violet Paget, 1856-1935* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964), 104; unsigned review, *Spectator*, 13 December 1884, quoted in Colby, *Vernon Lee*, 109.

⁵⁶ Letter from Henry James to Vernon Lee, 10 May 1884, quoted in Gunn, *Vernon Lee*, 104-5.

‘I will show fight’, I said yesterday or the day before when it came home to me from the letter of Monkhouse, the talk of Benn, etc., that the anonymous reviewer in the *Spectator* was not alone in accusing me of having written what Monkhouse calls a ‘nasty’ book.

Lee’s ‘moral passion’ had, these reviews suggest, been responsible for inventing the very thing that she objects to so strongly, namely sexual immorality. She herself wondered if their perception of excess in her disgust could be right, and meant the existence of some impurity in herself. She wrote in the journal ‘Benn says that I am *obsessed* by the sense of the impurity of the world [...]. May this be true? [...] Is my imagination corrupt?’⁵⁷

Kathy Psomiades, in her reading of *Miss Brown* as a ‘lesbian’ and ‘perverse aestheticist text’, preserves this early attentiveness to Lee’s expressions of sexual disgust, as well as the logic that Lee’s obsession with ‘the sexual question in life’ can itself be read as an ‘erotic preoccupation’. Going one step further than James and the early reviewers, Psomiades finds in the very stridency of Lee’s moral repudiation of sexualized Aestheticism a covert expression of dissident sexual desire. Sexual ‘purity’ in this novel, she argues, is not continence, but a means by which female sexual dissidence can be expressed in a hostile society. In this reading, Lee is considered to have protested (possibly deliberately and theatrically) too much: ‘the prude’, Psomiades says, ‘is just a pervert who refuses to admit it’.⁵⁸ The novel’s ‘purity ethos’, she continues, ‘is both a sign of the violence performed by sexism and homophobia, and a sign of resistance to that violence, as it allows the novel to tell its shocking story anyway’.⁵⁹ This reading of sexual continence as sexual dissidence, in which disgust, because it is a *bodily* reaction, indicates desire (giving Anne Brown what she calls a ‘Swinburnean body’), is justified for Psomiades by Lee’s relationship

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 105, 106.

⁵⁸ Psomiades, ‘Vernon Lee on Desire and Aesthetics’, 27.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

with Pater. Picking up on Lee's description of Anne as 'sexless', she writes: 'in the context of Aestheticism, "sexless" refers not merely to the absence of sex, but to the presence of idealized same-sex desire, as in Walter Pater's essay on Winckelmann'.⁶⁰ As I argue in Chapter Two, this need not be the primary significance of Pater's use of the word 'sexless' in the Winckelmann essay, and was not so universally taken as such by contemporary readers as Psomiades suggests (cf. 120).

Psomiades proceeds on the assumption that all bodily contact or interaction, and all embodiment of affect, is readable as sexual. This method not only allows no room for sexual continence as a legitimate signifier, meaning precisely what it claims to mean, but ignores Lee's careful efforts in her non-fiction to distinguish between sexual and nonsexual embodiment during aesthetic experience. Read alongside the non-fiction, 'purity' in *Miss Brown* aligns well with Lee's thinking on sexuality and aesthetics. Anne's very physical disgust at the embrace of the sensual Sacha Elaguine, for example, would in Lee's own terms indicate her integral healthiness, her intuitive, physical repulsion from what may infect her both morally and physically, rather than the covert expression of dissident sexual desire read into it by Psomiades. This is not to say that the 'sex' identified by Psomiades is the product of misreading, but that employment of a modern understanding of sex obscures the value that the text itself attributes to sexual categories.

It has frequently been claimed that the style of Lee's fiction, particularly the supernatural tales but also, as we have seen, *Miss Brown*, contain an expression of sexuality that is at odds with her voiced disgust. Lee's attempts in the former to create a gorgeous, sensuous aesthetic prose in conjunction with exotic settings and blood-curdling narratives have, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, inspired many to

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 27, 25.

find in them an expression of the sexuality that she expurgated from her life, while others see instead the confession of a liberated but covert sexuality that has left few traces in the archive. But these tales too can easily be read as entirely consistent with the theorizing of sexuality in her essays and dialogues. Just as Pater's *Imaginary Portraits*, to which Lee's supernatural tales bear a family resemblance, can be read as testing the boundaries between the sensuous and the sensual, the healthy and the unhealthy, so can Lee's stories be read as entirely in keeping with her more overt treatment of aesthetic sexuality, as attempts to establish a sensuous but non-sensual aestheticism, to push the sensuous to the limits without its tipping quite into the sensual aestheticism that she repudiates so strongly in *Miss Brown*. Just as Pater nurtured a strong dislike for any limits put onto the experience of the aesthetic individual other than those of health (though setting that particular bar rather lower than we would likely set it today), so Lee, though arguably expressing a far stronger sense of moral duty towards oneself and others, nevertheless harboured a sense also of the responsibility of the really moral individual to be able to deal with all subjects without being tainted by them. There is something in this of the old ideal of the incorruptible virgin, as someone whose personal cleanliness protects her during contact with the immoral: just as, in *Miss Brown*, Anne is able to keep herself 'pure' despite close contact, even marriage, with the weak and corrupt Walter Hamlin.

This is of course not the only way of reading sexuality in texts. But it is important to acknowledge the possibility of reading Lee's work as a continuous whole, and her statements on 'purity', 'chastity' and the non-sensual as a network of sustained thinking about the connection between sexual continence and aesthetics: not least because such a reading places Lee firmly in a particular Aesthetic tradition. Throughout her work she continued, as we have seen, to integrate continence ever

more closely and meaningfully with aesthetic beauty and everything that, for her, came under the heading of 'the ideal'. And she did so by deploying and engaging with a variety of late nineteenth-century discourses to each of which sexual continence was vital, including a particular brand of Paterian aestheticism.

Chapter Five

‘Men Have Died of Love’: George Moore

George Moore, unlike Walter Pater, Lionel Johnson and Vernon Lee, spent a large portion of his career writing joyously and explicitly about sex. Although he moved in much the same circles, and shared with them many aesthetic and intellectual interests, his work was notoriously sexually explicit, including detailed accounts of his own sexual encounters and love affairs in his several autobiographies, and frank explorations of sexual problems in his novels: the Irish marriage market in *Drama in Muslin* (1886; rewritten as *Muslin* 1915); adultery followed by neglect and alcoholism in *A Mummer's Wife* (1885); and a servant's single motherhood in *Esther Waters* (1894). Sex also made up a large part of Moore's carefully cultivated public persona. Like that of fellow Irish author Wilde, Moore's literary career was carried out at dinner tables and in drawing rooms as much as in the study, creating 'a self formulated for public consumption, to be understood and "read" just as one would read his written word'.¹ This public self-cultivation was partly developed through and in dialogue with his autobiographical writing, most of which he seems to have expected his contemporaries to receive as heavily fictionalized.² As a young writer in London he affected a Parisian, Decadent artistic persona close to that of the narrator of his *Confessions of a Young Man* (1888). This pose apparently included frequent bragging about sexual affairs, the truth of which was widely doubted. George Bernard Shaw famously claimed of the young Moore:

¹ Elizabeth Grubgeld, *George Moore and the Autogenous Self: The Autobiography and Fiction* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 16.

² Adrian Frazier, *George Moore: 1852-1933* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), xv.

He was always telling stories about himself and women. In every story there was a room full of mirrors and chandeliers, and the story usually ended with some woman throwing a lamp at George and driving him out of the house. Everybody used to laugh at George and no one believed him[.]³

These stories appear to have continued into the twentieth century, though Moore had, mid-way through the 1890s, abandoned the *Confessions* persona in favour of that of a worldly avuncular bachelor figure, what Elizabeth Grubgeld calls the role of the ‘wise fool’, and Adrian Frazier a ‘Don Juan of the mind’.⁴ In the autobiographical trilogy *Hail and Farewell* (1911-1914), he writes: ‘I am penetrated through and through by an intelligent, passionate, dreamy interest in sex, going much deeper than the rutting instinct’.⁵ He seems to have continued to elaborate upon this aspect of his persona in conversation. Yeats, after Moore’s death, claimed to have ‘disliked Moore’s now sentimental, now promiscuous amours, that main matter of his talk’, while John Eglinton (pseudonym of W. K. Magee) remembered that he ‘talked to us broadly [...] of sex’ during his time in Dublin (1901-1911), though Eglinton ‘knew him only as a laborious and austere liver’.⁶ Nancy Cunard, rumoured to be Moore’s illegitimate daughter, remembered his boasting to her, ‘I was a great dab at making love, you know!’⁷

But Moore’s hypersexual persona, however emphatic, is not the whole story of his engagement with sex. His novels also include a career-long preoccupation with sexual continence, from the celibate Cecilia in *A Drama in Muslin* (said by some to be based on Vernon Lee, whom he met at the house of Mary Robinson and described as

³ Quoted in Charles Morgan, *Epitaph on George Moore* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 15.

⁴ Grubgeld, *The Autogenous Self*, ix; Frazier, *George Moore*, 161. For the bachelor uncle as a stock figure in nineteenth-century literature, see Katherine V. Snyder, *Bachelors, Manhood and the Novel, 1850-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 182.

⁵ George Moore, *Hail and Farewell*, 3 vols (London: Heinemann, 1911-14), vol. 1, 232. All further references will be to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be given in the text.

⁶ W. B. Yeats, ‘Thoughts on George Moore’, in *The Man of Wax: Critical Essays on George Moore*, ed. Douglas A. Hughes (New York: New York University Press, 1971), 35-46, 40; John Eglinton, ‘Recollections of George Moore’, in *ibid.*, 15-34, 25; Frazier, *George Moore*, 259, 420, 429, 453-54.

⁷ Nancy Cunard, *GM: Memories of George Moore* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1956), 169.

speaking ‘with extraordinary eloquence’ about Pater’s *Marius*)⁸ to the thrice-rewritten short story collection first entitled *Celibates* (1895), then *In Single Strictness* (1922), and finally *Celibate Lives* (1927). He was fascinated also by religious celibacy, despite (or perhaps because of) his supposed hatred of the Roman Catholic Church, and made it the subject of several works of fiction: the two-novel series *Evelyn Innes* (1898) and *Sister Teresa* (1901), *The Lake* (1905), and *The Brook Kerith* (1916). And at the end of the three-volume autobiographical *Hail and Farewell*, Moore announced the onset of his own sexual impotence. In his account of this ‘change of life’ (vol. 3, 290) he employed the rhetoric of Victorian medical discourse concerning the putative dangers sex posed for men, as described in Chapter One. At first his impotence is described as age-related: ‘at forty-six or thereabouts one begins to feel that one’s time for love is over; one is consultant rather than practitioner’. Then it is blamed on the sexual appetite of his current partner: it ‘would have been the same earlier in my life as it was now’, and ‘perhaps no man’s health can withstand the strain that an amorous woman can put upon it’ (vol. 3, 275). When he finally has himself confide his difficulties to this woman, it is with the melodramatic words, ‘I must cease to be your lover unless my life is to be sacrificed’ (vol. 3, 277). ‘Men’, he claims, ‘have died of love, though Shakespeare says they haven’t. Manet and Daudet – both died of love’ (vol. 3, 276).

Manet and Daudet both died of complications associated with syphilis. It is likely that this disease was popularly conflated with the general degeneration said to issue from sexual excess, but it is probable that Moore is manipulating facts to suit his own ends. It is notable that his examples are both not only artists, one a painter and the other a writer, but also artists whom he particularly venerated. Richard Cave has

⁸ George Moore, *Avowals* (London: privately printed, 1919), 181. All further references will be to this edition and given in the text. For Lee as inspiration for Cecilia, see Frazier, *George Moore*, 107.

read Moore's descriptions of his impotency as an introduction of comedy into the otherwise touchingly serious episode of his leaving his lover, a kindly way of directing any satire towards himself rather than the abandoned woman.⁹ But this episode also leads into the revelation of his supposed destiny: to write *Hail and Farewell*. 'Chastity is the prerogative of the prophet', he declares; 'why no man can tell' (vol. 3, 289). Continence is a position of mysterious power and authority for Moore, enabling, among other things, the writing of what he confidently declares to be a great work, almost a new Bible, certainly a 'sacred book', the autobiographical form of which he compares to the letters of St Paul (291). This is, of course, comedy, but Moore had a habit of taking his jokes seriously. When Moore returned to England in 1911 – to escape the scandal caused by the libellous portraits he had given of members of the Irish literary scene in *Hail and Farewell* – sexual debility became a keynote of his public persona. In 1913, a year before the publication of the final volume, Carl Von Vechten remembers Moore having, at a dinner party, 'referred to his impotency in the most careless manner possible', and Yeats reported a similar story of the same year, of Moore's saying to a lady, 'how I regret, for your sake, that I'm impotent'.¹⁰ The infamous epigram that 'some men kiss and tell, Mr Moore tells but doesn't kiss' has been repeated by almost everyone writing on Moore since his Dublin days, most famously by Susan Mitchell, whom Moore had offended in *Hail and Farewell* by referring pointedly to her affair with the poet AE (pseudonym of George Russell).¹¹

⁹ Richard Cave, 'Introduction', in George Moore, *Hail and Farewell*, ed. Richard Cave (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1976), 11-44; 184.

¹⁰ See Frazier, *George Moore*, 387, 563 (n. 68).

¹¹ Susan Mitchell, *George Moore* (Dublin: Maunsell & Co, 1916), 47. For the original attribution to Dublin artist and wit Sarah Purser, see F. L. S. Lyons, 'George Moore and Edward Martyn', *Hermathena*, 98 (1964), 9-32; 13. For Mitchell's having taken offence at Moore's *Hail and Farewell*, see Frazier, *George Moore*, 368, and Elizabeth Grubgeld, 'Gossip, Art, and the Public Secret', in *George Moore: Influence and Collaboration*, eds Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2014), 137-49; 141-48.

Moore's turn from sexual promiscuity to continence can be understood as a plausible development of his lifelong pattern of thinking, as represented in his writing, about art's relation to sex. An important part of this thinking is Moore's engagement with the tradition of sexually continent Aestheticism explored by this thesis. This engagement, however, differs widely from that outlined in the previous three chapters. Most notably, Moore's positive imagining of sex and sensuality means that he is comfortable with the perception of a relationship between aesthetic and sexual experience, and so has no need to justify aesthetic pleasure by separating the sensuous from the sensual. He also differs from these three in his explicit engagement with a related but significantly more misogynistic, anti-domestic and marital discourse, what Herbert Sussman calls an 'apprehension about bourgeois marriage sapping male energy and domesticity vitiating male creative potency'.¹² There was, after all, a tradition within the French Decadent writing that Moore spent his youth reading of 'embracing sexual impotence as yet another means to prove one was not bourgeois'.¹³ But Moore's writing can also (like that of Pater, Johnson, and Lee), be read as representing a lifelong effort to synthesize the various social, aesthetic and sexual ideas of the late nineteenth century into a form of ethics, a theory of living that allowed both individual self-cultivation and an ideal of communality. Though he reaches largely different solutions and emphasizes different elements, he also takes advantage of the notion of productive sexual continence in order to associate continence with art and the artist in a similar way. It has frequently been said that Moore cannot be read as a philosopher; and as far as systematic philosophy is

¹² Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 5.

¹³ Angus McLaren, *Impotence: A Cultural History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 118.

concerned this is certainly true.¹⁴ Yet ethics are an essential part of both his writing and his strategy of self-cultivation, and while the systems he evolves are often broken, incomplete, illogical and downright contradictory, it is nevertheless possible to deduce a group of consistently privileged ideas. Among these, I argue, is an ideal of productive sexual continence for the artist, strongly associated by Moore with Pater.

Moore may be understood as a transitional figure in the history of sexuality, blending together an older discourse of Aesthetic continence with discourses of sexual permissiveness and liberation which, though comparatively rare in the nineteenth century, would come in the twentieth to dominate popular thinking. In order to untangle these discourses, I begin by examining some of the idiosyncratic connections Moore tended to draw between sex, art, and the network of values contributory to what he calls 'humanity', essential for understanding the significance he attributes to sexual continence. I then look at the place that his representations of continence held in this thinking, before going on to explore the points at which contradictory models of sex and the body cause Moore's theories to fracture. These points of tension occur most frequently in Moore's representations of the sexuality of the artist, and lead him to evolve an ideal of continent artistry related to, but at the same time very different from that of Pater, Johnson, and Lee.

Sex, Art and Humanity

Moore had a long and varied writing career, in which he moved through a great many stylistic affiliations. He has subsequently been accused of lacking coherence, of exhibiting a bewildering conglomeration of writing styles, the majority of which can

¹⁴ For example, Patrick Bridgwater, *George Moore and German Pessimism* (Durham: University of Durham, 1988), 40; and Helmut Gerber ed., *George Moore in Transition: Letters to T. Fisher Unwin and Lena Milman, 1894-1910* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1968), 101.

be traced to one or another of his artistic influences: his early Decadence to Baudelaire and Gautier; the Naturalism that superseded it to Zola; and the later writing composed according to his principle of the 'melodic line' to Pater and Turgenev; with healthy doses of a literary Impressionism throughout. This 'unabashed eclecticism' has more recently been reappraised as constituting Moore's importance rather than his derivativeness, and Moore himself has been refashioned as 'the precursor rather than the disciple', influencing the next generation of writers such as James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence.¹⁵ Grubgeld has written of the particular brand of ambivalence cultivated by Moore, particularly in his autobiographical prose: 'a self-reflective mode of narrative, one that typically queries its own explanations, thereby giving voice to both perspectives and settling upon neither'.¹⁶ Moore evolved what would have been identified by many as a Paterian relationship to truth as constant flux, strengthened and modified by a Schopenhauerian vision of life as eternal struggle between competing claims. His was, as Frazier says, an art which 'cared for truth, while never believing that it can be finally found'.¹⁷ Moore therefore generally acted and wrote as if the world consisted of competing and contradictory, yet equally valid truths. There is a great deal yet to be said about the development of this world-view and its impact upon his shifting artistic style.

But although Moore was fundamentally experimental both in style and content, his work nevertheless follows a clear trajectory. Raffaella Maiguashca Uslenghi has persuasively argued for an 'essential unity' in Moore's artistic

¹⁵ Fabienne Dabrigéon-Garcier and Christine Hugué, 'Introduction', in *George Moore: Across Borders*, eds Fabienne Dabrigéon-Garcier and Christine Hugué (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 1-12; 2, 3.

¹⁶ Grubgeld, *The Autogenous Self*, x.

¹⁷ Frazier, *George Moore*, 163. For Moore's relationship to and influence by Pater, see Robert Porter Sechler, *George Moore: A Disciple of Walter Pater*, unpublished doctoral dissertation (University of Oxford, 1931) *passim*; for his reading of Schopenhauer, see Bridgwater, *George Moore and German Pessimism*, 11-56.

principles that underlies his formal experimenting, with freedom of artistic expression, formal perfection and a commitment to artistic integrity constituting a constant artistic good towards which he strove.¹⁸ The same can be said of Moore's ethical thinking. From the late 1880s onwards Moore, like Lee and many of their contemporaries, frequently used the word 'life' to express the epitome of all that he valued: in his case, as in Lee's, a sense of unity and interconnectedness between all things in the world.¹⁹ For Moore, 'life' by no means implied the comprehensive philosophical system that we see in the work of many others at the *fin de siècle*; the 'life force' of George Bernard Shaw, for example, or the *élan vital* of Henri Bergson, or the 'life' of Nietzsche, or the Schopenhauerian 'Will' that influenced them all. Moore regularly refers to an energy, force, Will or rhythm that is to be found in all things, but his indiscriminate use of any and all of these terms suggests an uncertainty about the substance of such universality, or at least an unwillingness to commit to one or another. It is the principle of *connection* between things, the fact of relationship, that Moore is primarily concerned with rather than the agent of such connection.²⁰

The interconnectedness of all things is, in Moore's work, most intensely figured through three concepts: art, sex and 'humanity'. These concepts are sometimes described as if they were kinds of experience, through which an individual might access the universal 'life'. Sometimes, however, they seem to be treated as if they were diffuse elements existing in the world beyond humanity, much in the same way that we saw Lee use the term 'love'. All three are evidently essential to Moore's ideal mode of life, and are in his view intimately interconnected between themselves,

¹⁸ Raffaella Maiguashca Uslenghi, 'A Perspective of Unity in George Moore's Writings', *ELT*, trans. Jack W. Weaver, 27:3 (1984), 201-24; 214.

¹⁹ For discourses of 'life' and vitalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Jonathan Rose, *The Edwardian Temperament: 1895-1919* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1986), 74-116.

²⁰ For further discussion of Moore's use of the word 'life', see Grubgeld, *The Autogenous Self*, 200-31.

so that failure in one is frequently presented as entailing failure in the others. It was primarily through these categories and the relationship between them that Moore attempted to reconcile individual liberty of experience and self-cultivation with a need to connect to a wider human community. It is also through these categories that Moore can be seen to face his biggest intellectual challenge: how to develop a model of artistic integrity and exceptionalism that also satisfies the claims of sex and humanity.

Moore's use of the word 'sex' is both far more frequent than and different from that of Pater, Johnson, and Lee. In the 1880s and '90s, the decades in which Moore began to publish English prose, the word itself was undergoing semantic change. It had previously been used to refer to a gender quality that belonged to a particular person (i.e. his or her sex) or the grouping together of people with similar gender qualities (the female or male sex), and Pater, Johnson, and Lee primarily use it in this manner, preferring words such as 'passion', 'sensuality', or 'love' to refer to much that we now recognize as 'sex'. But 'sex' was also increasingly used at the turn of the century to refer to *interaction* between people. It began to express any behaviour that was coloured by the fact of another person's genital organization, from copulation to a woman's pleasure in being taken in to dinner by a man, or a man's pleasure in being read to by a woman. For example, an 1895 article entitled 'Sex in Fiction' uses 'sex' to mean broadly 'the relations of the sexes'. Though this relation clearly includes intercourse, or at least something that constitutes, in the writer's words, 'moral ravages', it must also mean more than that if it is, as he claims, to be seen as making up 'a good half of human experience'.²¹ From the late '80s onwards, Moore increasingly used the word 'sex' in this expanded, as well as in the earlier,

²¹ D. F. Hannigan, 'Sex in Fiction', *Westminster Review*, 143 (January, 1895), 616-25; 618, 616, 618.

narrower sense. The novels of the early '80s use the word primarily in reference to a gendered personal quality, almost always in women: 'the triumphs of her sex',²² 'the intimate fibres of her sex',²³ 'all the characteristics of her sex'.²⁴ But in 1888 he uses it differently. In describing the presence of women in a Paris studio, the narrator of *Confessions* approves of 'that sense of sex which is so subtle a mental pleasure, and which is, in its outward aspect, so interesting to the eye – the gowns, the hair lifted, showing the neck; the earrings, the sleeves open at the elbow'.²⁵ 'Sex' has become something created and experienced between people, more specifically between a man and a woman, though both parties need not be aware. This widened 'sex', it will be noted, is still highly gendered, and generally Moore represents it as created, consciously or unconsciously, by women and experienced by men. Though not unaware of sensual feelings between members of the same gender, and indeed writing about it explicitly in the story 'Hugh Monfert' (1922), Moore relates his idealized, widened 'sex' to heterosexual experience only. As we will see later in this chapter, Moore treats homosexuality as entirely outside of his privileged ideological nexus, as much alienated from 'life' as the experience of those who have never known sensual feeling.

The 1894 novel *Esther Waters*, with which Moore finally achieved popular success, does not use the word 'sex' at all. But his next effort, the novel-pair *Evelyn Innes* and *Sister Teresa*, brought with it a veritable orgy. From then on, 'sex' in Moore's writing often referred to a radically expanded category of experience which, while including copulative acts, also often epitomized, and sometimes offered access

²² George Moore, *A Modern Lover* (London: Vizetelly, 1885; first published 1883), 178.

²³ George Moore, *A Mummer's Wife* (London: Vizetelly, 1885), 320.

²⁴ George Moore, *A Drama in Muslin* (London: Vizetelly, 1886), 3.

²⁵ George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*, 2nd ed. (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1889), 31. *Confessions* was first published in 1888. It was, however, almost immediately heavily revised. All further references, unless otherwise specified, will be to this 1889 version and will be given in the text.

to all experience that Moore believed to be worthwhile. See, for example, a passage from the 1906 *Memoirs of My Dead Life*, first published in 1890, which describes a young couple dancing:

There is no denying it, that in these moments of sex one does feel more conscious than at any other time of rhythm, and, after all, rhythm is joy. It is rhythm that makes music, that makes poetry, that makes pictures; what we are after all is rhythm, and the whole of the young man's life is going to a tune as he walks home, to the same tune as the stars are going over his head.²⁶

Sex in this passage has become a particularly intense example of a universal experience, as well as a way of accessing this universality, despite its activation still requiring the friction of gender difference.

'Humanity' is another concept that Moore never explicitly theorized, and yet burdened with meaning. Whereas Pater and Johnson had used the words 'human', 'humanities', and 'humane' to indicate a continuity with a cultural humanism to which sexual continence, at least for the few, was integral, Moore uses it to bring together apparently contradictory ideas which, though less scholarly, are not entirely alien to Pater and Johnson's visions. The first is a commitment to personal individualism, a creed that privileged self-cultivation over social development, and was gaining more support at the turn of the century. For Moore, as for many of his contemporaries, the liberty to cultivate 'self' in this manner was essentially 'humane'; he never, however, politicized this desire for liberty into what we would now call a 'human right' in the manner of many socialist individualists such as Shaw. The second is an interest in a universal human nature, and the idea that this commonality has the power to effect successful communication between people.

²⁶ George Moore, 'Bring in the Lamp' (first published 1890), in *Memoirs of My Dead Life* (London: Heinemann, 1906), 269-85; 274. All further references, unless otherwise specified, will be to this edition and given in the text.

Grubgeld has identified the competing claims of personal, subjective individualism and community as one of the main animating concerns in Moore's autobiographical work, as he struggles, in her account, to assert individual experience in the face of a late-Victorian British society perceived to be constructed on collectivist lines, and in the face of his own recognition of the force of environment in shaping character: 'His wish to fully author himself is offset by a profound historical consciousness that cannot ignore the nagging probability of determinate forces outside the self'.²⁷ While generally agreeing with this account, I would add that in Moore's later work at least, this struggle for individual expression and cultivation in an oppressive society often gave way to an insistence upon the importance of what was common to all people. As he more consistently proclaimed a faith in 'life' in post-1890s work, so he more frequently gestured towards an essential common humanity running underneath individualism. This universal element, if acknowledged and accessed, could occasionally, he suggests, enable communication between very different individuals. For example, in *Memoirs of My Dead Life* (1906), he writes that 'every character creates its own stories; we are like spools, and each spool fills itself up with a different-coloured thread' (121). But by *Avowals* (1919) the focus had shifted from the individual spool to the common thread: 'human nature does not change in the essentials' and 'we are ourselves only in the pattern we weave'.²⁸ Individualism is still important – indeed, the impulse to individuation is itself part of common humanity – but only so far as universal humanity is not lost sight of.

This vision of 'life' as the principle of interconnection, represented most clearly at times when Moore highlights the relations between sex and humanity, is most overtly explored in Moore's autobiographical writing, where it is also brought

²⁷ Grubgeld, *The Autogenous Self*, 2.

²⁸ Moore, *Avowals*, 171, 195.

into relation with another of Moore's highly valued categories: art. In *Confessions of a Young Man*, Moore had not yet come to an explicit articulation of this idea of universal interconnectedness: the word 'life' is used many times in *Confessions*, but it does not carry the metaphysical weight that it does in his later work. But *Confessions* – a tribute to personal individualism, particularly of what Grubgeld calls the cultivation of the 'autogenous self', self-creation or self-realization – is already clear in drawing connections between art, sex and humanity. This individualism is furthered by what Moore calls 'instinct', an irrational personal will present from birth that guides one through the myriad influences of life. 'Intricate, indeed', the narrator of *Confessions* says, 'was the labyrinth of my desires; all lights were followed with the same ardour, all cries were eagerly responded to'. Yet 'one cry was more persistent, and as the years passed I learned to follow it with increasing vigour' (2). This persistent cry is said to be art, and for this narrator instinct and art become one impulse. *Confessions*, which tell the tale of the narrator's following of this impulse, is a semi-autobiographical, semi-fictional account of Moore's youth, in which he goes to Paris to become an artist. It acted for Moore as an experimental ground on which ideas that would become key concerns were first played out, alongside others, such as Decadent themes, which did not survive in his later work or persona.

It is in *Confessions* that sex, art, and humanity first overtly come together as mutually sustaining values. The narrator claims: 'I am a sensualist in literature. I may see perfectly well that this or that book is a work of genius, but if it doesn't "fetch me," it doesn't concern me, and I forget its very existence' (139). He goes on to equate this irrational, 'sensual' pleasure with the pleasures of sex: 'there are affinities in literature corresponding to, and very analogous to, sexual affinities' (140). Other attempts to connect art and sex are reliant on the humanity of both. After being forced

to leave Paris, the narrator returns to London, where the narrative pauses while he indulges in angry musings on the neglect of art by English society. A persistent theme is the fall of 'the Tavern' and the rise of 'the Club': 'some seventy years ago the Club superseded the Tavern, and since then all literary intercourse has ceased in London'. Such 'literary intercourse' is, he believes, essential to the creation of artistic culture, and here we have art connected to humanity; it cannot develop on its own, but is dependent on free communion with other artists such as that found in the cafés of Paris. What the café and the Tavern have in common is what he calls 'Bohemianism' (287), which he never defines but seems equivalent with what he calls 'enthusiasm and devil-may-careism' (233), productive of 'audacity of thought and expression' (240). Sexual liberty is implicit in this ideal, as well as anti-domesticity. He regrets that 'you can't bring a lady to a club, and you have to get into a corner to talk about them' (234), while more explicitly asking 'if lovers were not necessary for the development of poet, novelist, and actress, why have they always had lovers?' (235-36). A certain comradeship and free communication is needed for art to flourish, and sex is an essential part of this licence.

Against 'bohemianism' he sets 'respectability', 'the hearth', and 'the villa'. Convention in England is hostile both to sex and free human intercourse, and therefore strangles art: 'everyone can go to the tavern, and no place in England where everyone can go is considered respectable' (234). It is also hostile to sex: 'the villa made known its want', the 'certainty that nothing would come into the hands of dear Kate and Mary and Maggie that they might not read', in response to which demand 'English fiction became pure' (249). This, he claims, was affected by circulating libraries, which in suppressing sex in literature had also worked to suppress humanity. Like Lee, but with very different intentions, he claims that 'human nature

has from the earliest time shown a liking for dirty stories; dirty stories have formed a substantial part of every literature' (250). In 1885 Moore had expressed similar sentiments in a pamphlet entitled *Literature at Nurse; or, Circulating Morals*; a tract which, along with his pioneering of the six-shilling one-volume novel, helped to break the monopoly that circulating libraries such as Mudie's and Smith's had held on English literature for much of the nineteenth century.²⁹ It could be argued that this criticism was somewhat opportunistic; both Mudie's and Smith's had banned several of Moore's early novels. Yet Moore's reuse of the sentiments of this polemic in *Avowals* (1919), in an article of the same year entitled 'Literature and Morals', and finally in *A Communication to My Friends* (1933), suggests an enduring commitment well after the circulating libraries had lost their hold.³⁰

This free sexual and artistic intercourse, in *Confessions*, is represented as characteristic of Continental but not English society. In the 1916 edition he summed it up in the phrase 'blithe humanities',³¹ suggesting that there is something essentially humane in personal artistic-sexual expression and development, in the 'self-realisation' of the artistic individual. In England, he claims, this atmosphere of 'communal enjoyment' and 'spontaneity' can only be found in the music hall, and it is thus there that he finds most promise for art: 'it is irritating, it is magnetic, it is symbolic, it is art. Not art, but a sign, a presentiment of art' (256). This springing up of art out of an intercourse that is represented as the expression of human nature was a note sounded many times in Moore's later work; for example, his valuation in *Hail*

²⁹ George Moore, *Literature at Nurse: Or, Circulating Morals* (London: Vizetelly, 1885). For more on Moore and censorship, see Jane Jordan, "'Literature at Nurse': George Moore, Ouida, and *Fin-de-Siècle* Literary Censorship", in *George Moore: Influence and Collaboration*, eds Heilmann and Llewellyn, 69-82. For the effect of the circulating libraries on the English literary market, see Guinevere L. Griest, *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970).

³⁰ See Edwin Gilcher, *A Bibliography of George Moore* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1970), 16, 103, 212.

³¹ George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*, 4th ed. (London: Heinemann, 1916), 151.

and Farewell of the 'boon companion', the importance that he attributes in those volumes to friendship and influence, and his adoption in *Avowals* of the dialogue form, an illustration of art as a dialectic between two artistically inclined friends (vol. 1, 57).

The affinities between the categories of art, sex, and humanity are elaborated upon in *Memoirs of My Dead Life* (1906), a collection of partly new, partly revised essays which, like *Confessions*, hover between the autobiographical and the fictional. By this time the persona cultivated by Moore was decidedly less Decadent, less anti-establishment, but certainly still sexually *risqué*. Again he is explicit in connecting art with sex: 'what would art be', he imagines his admired Verlaine asking, 'without life, without love?' (83). 'Life' in *Memoirs* more often has the metaphysical meaning that he tended to give it after about 1900, as can be seen in the chapter entitled 'In the Luxemburg Gardens'. A girl named Mildred seems to have no interests other than men, about whom she chatters unceasingly. But the narrator cannot quite believe it: 'the thought rose up in my mind that one so interested in sex as Mildred was could not be without interest in art' (239-40). He is vindicated in this supposition when Mildred unexpectedly produces a violin and plays a stirring melody, of which he says, 'she was playing out of the great silence that is in every soul' (252). As someone with a talent for art and predilection for sexual flirtation, Mildred is not only possessed of an essential humanity, but also able to communicate that humanity to others, and this regardless of the apparent triteness of her personality. Moore finishes the chapter by claiming, 'I have written this account of [Mildred] because it seems to me to throw a gleam into the mystery of life, without, however, doing anything to destroy the mystery' (255).

The identification of this art-sex-humanity nexus as indicative of a ‘mystery’ seems to suggest that Moore was becoming aware of the rational deficiency of his ‘life’, though not that he recognized this as an argument against such a world view. He continued to use words like ‘energy’ and ‘will’ to express a sense of interconnectedness, and to use both art and sex, especially in conjunction, to exemplify his point. An instance of this manoeuvre can be found in his preface for the 1907 American edition of *Memoirs*. This edition suppressed several of the most sexually explicit passages in the chapters entitled ‘The Lovers of Orelay’ and ‘In the Luxemburg Gardens’, to which Moore finally agreed on the condition that he would include a preface.³² The result was the coyly entitled ‘Apologia Pro Scriptis Meis’, perhaps the most explicit expression of his belief in the affinity between art and sex, from which the value of humanity was never long absent.

The preface begins with a probably fictional letter from a reader of *Memoirs* (presumably English), who objects that ‘your outlook on life is so different from mine that I can hardly imagine you being built of the same stuff as myself’, to which Moore, in the interests of humanity, replies: ‘let me assure you that we are “built of the same stuff.” Were it not so you would have put my book aside’.³³ Art again acts as a ground on which common humanity reveals itself. This universal human nature is then elaborated upon as a common individualism, as he regrets ‘the fallacy, which till now [the correspondent] has accepted as a truth, that there is one immutable standard of conduct for all men and all women’ (1907; xi). Instead of a common standard, Moore imagines a world in which each individual were allowed to live to their own, inevitably different standards of moral behaviour. But as usual, he vacillates between individualism and universality, suggesting of the letter-writer that ‘if there be no

³² See Gilcher, *A Bibliography of George Moore*, 73.

³³ George Moore, ‘Apologia Pro Scriptis Meis’, in *Memoirs of My Dead Life* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1907), viii, x. All further references will be given in the text.

moral standard he will nevertheless find a moral idea if he looks for it in Nature', even if 'the idea changes and adapts itself to circumstance, and sometimes leaves us for long intervals' (1907; xiii). Moore seems to be struggling here to accommodate both a need for absolute individual freedom for oneself, and a need for protection from the freedom of others, and reaches for the latter in the form of an unquestionable base standard of behaviour. Like so many other turn-of-the-century 'life' theories, Moore's suggests not only a cosmology but also an ethic.

It is also hard to deduce quite what he means here by the word 'Nature', which seems as vague as, if not more so than, the word 'life'. These fuzzy terms often seem to be used by Moore, as they were used by many in this period, to gesture emotively towards a revolutionary extreme without actually committing to anything; that is, to suggest extremes without ruling out more moderate positions, to which a writer could then retreat if needed. Thus Moore allows a reader to decide whether by 'Nature' he means to idealize the merciless domination of the weak by the strong that many in the period saw as a Darwinist view of Nature as competition, or whether he is indicating a more communal, mutual dependency of the kind that Darwin came to in his later work (cf. 216). It is a word which, conveniently for Moore, stretches to extremes of both individualism and community, and thus holds them in uneasy combination. In *Confessions*, a view of the world as competition temporarily won out, expressed as 'the antique world, the bare, barbarous soul of beauty and of might' (206). This idealization of the ancient world, learned or borrowed primarily from Gautier, constituted a great part of Moore's very early artistic persona, especially when he wrote *Pagan Poems* (1881). But it is the interconnectedness of all things that eventually comes to the forefront in the 'Apologia'. The sexual-moral objections of his correspondent allows Moore to use sex as the key example of false moral

standards, with *Esther Waters* and prostitution as examples of how the world is degraded by the rejection of sex. 'We have come to speak of it as part of our lower nature', he regrets, 'permissible, it is true, if certain conditions are complied with, but always looked upon askance' (1907; xix). With a sleight of hand he then equates sexual desire with the desire for beauty, considering his correspondent as 'one incapable of the effort necessary to understand me if I were to tell him, for instance, that the desire of beauty is in itself a morality'. This he backs up with all the weight of antiquity: 'it was, perhaps, the only morality the Greeks knew, and upon the memory of Greece we have been living ever since'. However, Greece here does not, as it did in *Confessions*, imply an ethic of competition, but rather the universal 'desire for beauty' that connects sex with art. His examples of 'distributors' of this desire in Ancient Greece are Aspasia, Lais, Phryne and Sappho, and the inclusion of a poet in this list of courtesans leads into his praise, next, of Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin* as a book in which 'art and sex are not estranged' (1907; xx). Finally, in writing of this ideal relationship, he returns to the vocabulary of 'life':

There is but one energy, and the vital fluid, whether expended in love or in a poem, is the same. The poet and the lover are creators, they participate and carry on the great work begun billions of years ago when the great Breath breathing out of chaos summoned the stars into being (1907; xxi).

Again, of course, many questions are left unanswered. In what way is energy a vital fluid? Is this a common force, or a material substance? Or is it, rather, a spirituality, and the 'great Breath' a supernatural being? Otherwise, is 'great Breath' a metaphor that makes it seem more spiritual than is literally intended? Moore appears committed to keeping these questions unanswered, stressing the connection rather than defining the connecting substance.

After the turn of the century, when Moore moved to Ireland and interested himself in the Irish literary scene, his ethical theories underwent minor but significant changes. Increasingly it was mystery itself, rather than an uncertain energy, fluid, or rhythm, that he figured as connecting all things in 'life'. In *Avowals*, the keynotes are 'mystery' and 'the eternal', and the ultimate mystery of all things is cited as the most persuasive proof of eternity. But again this unchanging eternity is most intensely seen in sex, art and humanity. 'The Anglo-Saxon race cannot understand', he complains, 'that man's sexual conduct has not varied during the centuries, and cannot vary' (107). This, he continues, is because 'some things are for all time and never lose their significance, being part and parcel of humanity' (108). Art, too, or what he values as good art, is similarly unchanging: 'progress in aesthetics is impossible' (288). Consequently he prizes 'that sense of the eternal which gives mystery and awe to a work of art' (81). It is in accordance to this standard that he judges all artists in *Avowals*; Turgenev has it because he realizes that 'below the surface, in our instincts there is a calm immortality' (132), and Pater has it because 'in writing about Marius' he writes 'about mankind rather than about the mere individual' (193). Tolstoy, on the other hand, does not have it, and in denying the eternal becomes 'lord over what is actual and passing' (147): a thoroughly inferior lordship, Moore would have us believe, than that of Turgenev and Pater. Further, Tolstoy is too concerned with morality for Moore: 'moral ideas are always changing, and what is wrong in one age is right in another, whereas beauty may be said to be eternal' (162). As in the 'Apologia', moral relativity is somewhat undermined by an appeal to the eternal truth of such relativity, the establishment of relativity itself as an eternal law of 'Nature'.

His efforts in *Avowals* at describing eternity are, however, constantly frustrated, leading either to contradiction or to a declaration of inexpressibility. This is

nowhere more evident than in his account of his relationship with Pater (explored in more detail below). In attempting to describe Pater's personality he comes to the conclusion that he will always be 'a mystery' (210). He also openly contradicts himself on the subject of art's relation to sex, first saying that the celibate artist, such as (in his opinion) Jane Austen and George Borrow, is better able to understand the opposite sex because they have proper distance from them, and then that Henry James is unable to do precisely this because of his inexperience: 'he did not carry my thoughts towards a man who had known women at first hand and intimately' (181). In later chapters he begins to appeal to the superiority of irrational over rational truth; on Kipling he says that 'he writes with the eye that appreciates all that the eye can see, but of the heart he knows nothing, for the heart cannot be observed', and 'he has seen much more than he has felt, and we prefer feeling to seeing' (167, 170). In a fictional dialogue with American playwright John Balderston, he answers enquiries into his opinions on art by denying that such things can be described in a logical manner. Yet 'a thing does not cease to exist because it cannot be defined'. He continues, 'let us talk about art, and in the course of conversation you will gather my reasons' (289). The truth can only be approached through an accumulation of example, of anecdote, through which the sympathetic listener will trace a common feeling. This understanding of truth may throw much light upon Moore's choice of autobiography, and indeed dialogue, as an artistic medium.

Moore to recapitulate, repeatedly suggested that sex, art and humanity could be essentially traced to the same impulse. After about 1890 he began to associate this impulse with a larger conception of 'life', in which everything in the world was similarly connected by a mysterious something that all had in common, though he was reluctant to investigate the exact nature of this something, preferring more as

time went on to maintain its 'mystery'. This idea of universal interconnectedness also often implied an ethic, in which Moore valued experience that seemed to him to promise connection, whether to other people or to the natural world. In a world where sex (in the expanded sense) was experienced as, essentially, a kind of communion, a mysterious connection regarded as one intense example of the connections between all things, an individual's alienation from it suggested a deficiency also in potential for all other forms of connection, and thus all experience of 'life'.

In his fiction, Moore frequently used sexual continence to suggest that, in denying the value of sex, people effectively dehumanize themselves, cut themselves off from all valuable communication with 'life'. Continence is rarely represented in Moore's fiction as a conscious choice made with certain benefits in view; even the seemingly voluntary vow of religious celibacy, as in *Sister Teresa*, is represented as the result of psychological neurosis, or seduction on the part of the Roman Catholic Church. More often it is seen as issuing from a combination of environmental factors and what he calls 'temperament', though it is rarely completely or adequately explained. But as well as interrupting an individual's relationship with 'life' in order to demonstrate the importance of sex both in individual lives and in a community, Moore's explorations of sexual continence often come upon the limits of this formulation; the points at which his conception of 'life' threatens no longer to explain the world, or where 'mystery' converges strangely around the wrong values. These limits are found in the enigma of the incurable celibate, who exists seemingly independent of 'life'. Elsewhere it is possible to see a similar sense of difficulty emerging in Moore's writing about the artist, whose innate desire for a self-contained, self-sufficient art similarly separates him from both sex and humanity.

Celibates

Mark Llewellyn describes how, for Moore, celibacy was not simply a sexual state, but ‘the ultimate form of otherness or difference which the individual consciousness feels about itself when it encounters the world around it’.³⁴ Moore’s understanding of celibacy in these stories constitutes a negative expression of his understanding of sex as a universal and universalizing experience, since physical continence is shown to preclude all intimate knowledge of others, of the world and even of oneself. In this way ‘celibate’ comes to mean a kind of all-round continence that entails not only abstinence from sexual acts, but also total exclusion from ‘life’ in all its manifestations. Notably, each story contains a failure in the practice or appreciation of art.

The 1895 volume *Celibates* consists of three of stories: ‘Mildred Lawson’, ‘John Norton’ and ‘Agnes Lahens’.³⁵ The first of these, ‘Mildred Lawson’, tells the story of a young woman whose search for ‘self-realisation’ fails owing to her innate desire for continence, her inability to lose herself in love, art or religion. She ends the story with the cry, ‘give me a passion for God or man, but give me a passion. I cannot live without one’.³⁶ Mildred, though described as personally without physical sexual desire, is easily able, as a beautiful woman, to inspire that feeling in men. She becomes increasingly aware as the story progresses that she can enter into the game of sex, though the sentiment is hidden from her. Thus she allows her lover Morton to

³⁴ Mark Llewellyn, ‘Introduction’, in *In Single Strictness (1922)*, ed. Mark Llewellyn, vol. 5 of *The Collected Short Stories of George Moore: Gender and Genre*, eds Mark Llewellyn and Ann Heilmann (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2007), vii-xlii; ix.

³⁵ For Moore’s lifelong admiration for the works of Balzac, see Adrian Frazier, ‘The *Fin de Siècle* Meets French Realism: Moore, Balzac, and the Peculiarity of Writers’, in *George Moore: Influence and Collaboration*, eds Heilmann and Llewellyn, 27-37.

³⁶ George Moore, *Celibates* (London: Walter Scott, 1895), 312. All references will be to this edition and given in the text.

kiss her, and even looks forward to this moment as a conquest; but when it happens ‘she gave her lips easily, with a naturalness that surprised and deceived him’ (199); the reader is allowed to perceive that Mildred’s motivations for this action are not sexual. The same problem occurs in her essays into art and religion: she becomes a painter but gives it up on realizing her lack of talent, and converts to Catholicism but fails to get beyond the seduction of ritual. Her inability to feel sexual desire also leads to a complete misunderstanding of art as Moore sees it, as reflected in her agreement with the statement that ‘in the studio a woman puts off her sex. There’s no sex in art’ (168). What is essentially missing in Mildred is the universal impulse that binds all people together, the feeling for ‘life’.

The eponymous protagonists of ‘John Norton’ and ‘Agnes Lahens’ suffer in similar ways, though they are less conscious than Mildred of the reason for their suffering. ‘John Norton’ is a condensed version of the novel *A Mere Accident* (1887), and its protagonist also reappears in *Mike Fletcher* (1889). Moore claimed that the character was based on his friend and cousin Edward Martyn, who would also play a large role in *Hail and Farewell*. Unlike Mildred, John is not innately (or, as Moore would have it, ‘temperamentally’) celibate, but rather has so firmly and consciously suppressed his sexuality on first becoming aware of it that he has forgotten how it feels. This active suppression is due to the combined influence of a strict Catholic upbringing and the troubling nature of his early sexual feelings. His clergyman neighbour Mr Hare says to him, ‘the severest moralists are those who have never known the pain of temptation’; to which John revealingly replies, ‘perhaps the severest moralists are those who have conquered their temptations’, continuing, ‘if I have had temptations I have conquered them. They have passed away’ (332). The

word ‘temptation’ appears again when John muses on his equal attraction to Christian and Hellenic aesthetics:

once there had been a sharp struggle, but Christ, not Apollo, had been the victor, and the great cross in the bedroom of Stanton College overshadowed the beautiful slim body in which Divinity seemed to circulate like blood; and this photograph was all that now remained of much youthful anguish and much temptation (366).

Gender is not explicitly mentioned (although syntax makes it difficult not to associate the ‘beautiful slim body’ with Apollo), and this particular passage could be read as a religious, rather than a sexual struggle, though the spectre of homosexuality lingers around this bodily attraction to Hellenism.³⁷ Homosexuality would be made explicit in Moore’s 1922 rewrite of ‘John Norton’, entitled ‘Hugh Monfert’ and collected into the volume *In Single Strictness* (1922). Moore knew that Edward Martyn was homosexual in inclination though supposed to be celibate, and in *Hail and Farewell* Moore, in the words of Frazier, ‘danced around [this], planting his brightly beribboned darts like a mincing banderillero around a stumbling bull’.³⁸ However, homosexuality was not the *kind* of sex that Moore saw as involving ‘life’, and so not the kind that held a kinship to art. Frazier has described Moore himself as ‘a homosexual man who loved to make love to women’, but his evidence is Moore’s attraction to non-reproductive forms of sexuality and to the Aestheticism of Walter Pater.³⁹ Throughout his writings Moore associates his expanded sense of sex as a universalizing experience, especially when connected also to art, exclusively with women. In *Hail and Farewell* he objects to Martyn’s misogyny in terms only semi-

³⁷ For the history of the Victorian connection between Hellenism and homosexuality, see Linda Dowling, *Hellenism and Homosexuality in Victorian Oxford* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994).

³⁸ Frazier, *George Moore*, 368. For more on Edward Martyn, see Madeleine Humphreys, *The Life and Times of Edward Martyn: An Aristocratic Bohemian* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2007).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 247.

ironic: ‘without women we should be all reasonable, Edward; there would be no instinct, and a reasonable world – what would it be like? A garden without flowers, music without melody’ (vol. 1, 189). Martyn and John Norton’s rejection of women is still expressed as a rejection of all real sensuality, for Moore inextricably linked to instinct (however much they may enjoy music and painting).

John’s Roman Catholic conscience forces him to deny all sexual feeling, and this leads eventually to a denial of all feeling for human society. There is a brief stirring of sex in his courtship of the virginal Kitty, though he theorizes his attraction to her as strictly aesthetic: ‘he hardly perceived any sex in her; she was sexless as a work of art’ (396). This of course says as much about his misunderstanding of art as about his attraction to Kitty, and gestures towards a common, fundamental failure. John is so shocked at his own behaviour when he finds himself forcibly kissing Kitty (at which she, however virginal, is not nearly so shocked as he) that he first proposes marriage, and then determines to separate from her entirely. Before he can do so, however, she is raped by a tramp, and on seeing John again mistakes him for her attacker and throws herself out of a window. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn conclude that the tramp and John are actually the same person, and the story an exploration of split personality; a compelling but unnecessary interpretation.⁴⁰ Kitty can be read as having recognized the universal nature of the impulse that has caused her so much pain, and this awful similarity is realized also by John: ‘he had kissed her by force! “My God! then the difference between us is only one of degree, and the vilest humanity claims kinship of instinct with me!”’ (452). Having acknowledged the universality of sex, his disgust at the very idea of a common humanity that would link him with such a man leads him to cut himself off from all human relations.

⁴⁰ Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn, ‘What Kitty Knew: George Moore’s John Norton, Multiple Personality, and the Psychopathology of Late-Victorian Sex Crime’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 59:3 (December, 2004), 372-403.

The stories in *In Single Strictness* are almost entirely new or rewritten ('Mildred Lawson' as 'Henrietta Marr' and 'John Norton' as 'Hugh Monfert'), but the sexual continence of their characters even more explicitly entails a lack of connection to 'life'. In 'Priscilla and Emily Lofft', the spinster Emily's gradual awakening to the alien nature of her recently deceased twin sister is represented by her discovery in the garden shed of a half-read copy of the 'improper' novel *Madame Bovary*, enlightening her as to a sexual curiosity she had assumed absent in the also unmarried Priscilla.⁴¹ In 'Wilfred Holmes', Wilfred's inability to form meaningful relationships, either with family and friends or in business, is synecdochally represented in his flute-playing, which fails because, although he can compose a melody or top-line, he has no ear for harmony. In 'Henrietta Marr', a passage is added that has Etta's friend say to another girl, 'my experiences do not help me to understand her, nor do yours' (275). The word 'experiences' is highly suggestive of specifically sexual experience, of which her friends have plenty; Etta's continence puts her beyond the understanding of her friends.

Moore's estimation of the communicative potentials of human nature had, however, changed between the 1895 *Celibates* and the 1922 *In Single Strictness*. Earlier writings, however much they portrayed misunderstandings between differently constituted people, always seemed hopeful that the similarity between people was strong enough, given enough time and effort, eventually to make communication and understanding possible. In the 1907 'Apologia', it made sense to Moore to assume that he and ostensibly very different people were all 'made of the same stuff' (1907, x). But somewhere around the turn of the century, Moore began increasingly to represent individuals as essentially divided from each other despite

⁴¹ George Moore, *In Single Strictness* (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922), 45. All references will be to this edition and given in the text.

the universality of humanity, and this was one of the central themes of *In Single Strictness*. The possibility of knowing other people, regardless of the degree to which they understand sex, is seriously doubted in each of the stories. In 'Henrietta Marr', Morton complains to a friend of the enigma of Etta's behaviour, 'there must be a reason. There is always one', to which she replies 'no, Morton, there needn't be a reason [...] but there is a cause always'. Morton replies, 'Perhaps [...] a cause that may elude us, an undiscoverable cause' (273). It is on this note that the story ends, with Morton saying over Etta's deathbed: 'and what can we know of her motives? hardly anything [...], very little about our own' (287). Only one of the stories seems willing to frame this opacity more positively, as 'Wilfred Holmes' concludes that he is 'one of those weak, timid, harmless souls, come out of the mould that Nature reserves for some great purpose known only to herself, mayhap the preservation of pity and compassion in the world' (27). This statement has generally been taken as Moore's rationale for describing such strange characters, as though the very obscurity of another human being could compel us to reach out to them in sympathy.

The 'celibate' stories thus demonstrate and test the interconnectedness of 'life' by suspending one of its key components, representing lives that are somehow lived outside of 'life' (in Moore's special sense) and, moreover, inviting us sympathetically to see that alienation, to see in it something of our own isolation in the world. It is notable that for the majority of the 'celibate' characters in both collections their continence cannot be traced to any one influence or environmental factor. Rather, in all of these stories, explanations, theories and etiologies breed only more explanations, theories, etiologies. This very multiplication suggests the author's ultimate dissatisfaction with any means of explanation. In *Celibates* this was at least partly a refutation of Naturalism, and its tracing of everything back to environment;

in 1895 Moore was still in the process of distancing himself from the artistic influence of Zola.⁴² As Moore stated in the 'Advertisement' to *In Single Strictness*, these characters are 'temperaments' (v), people mysteriously predisposed towards continence, a condition that environment may have accentuated, but has not caused (again, homosexuality is evidently included in this category). Temperamental continence is important for Moore because it seems to be the one thing in the world that resists connection. It not only symbolizes an essential mystery in humanity, but also stands as evidence of an original, rather than acquired, absence of those qualities that he considered to be the most intense expression of 'life'. The 'celibate' can be read as an emblem of the eternal ultimate futility of all philosophizing, all human attempts to know the world. Further, as the final sentence on 'Wilfred Holmes' suggests, a Darwinian conception of nature as intentionality lingered in Moore's philosophy of 'life', but the temperamental celibate ultimately resists all such intentionality and purpose. And therein lies another major tension in the 'celibate' stories.

Moore's celibates are failures in art, as their lack of sex leads them to misunderstand it. A similar uselessness and purposelessness, however, as division from utility, were fundamental to Moore's understanding of art's relationship to society. As Uslenghi has convincingly shown, Moore often claimed that he 'aimed at an art free from any extraneous element and having the creation of beauty as its unique goal'.⁴³ Though not always the case – as, for example, when he implies that art is useful in creating an access to human sympathy and even 'life' – this idea of a self-contained art was certainly central to Moore's vision. This narrative, counter to Moore's valuation of art elsewhere as an example of universal impulse towards

⁴² See Frazier, *George Moore*, 140.

⁴³ Uslenghi, 'A Perspective of Unity', 208.

connection, combined with an alternative conception of sex and the body to produce deep tensions in Moore's thinking about the sexuality of the artist.

The Artist

Moore's work strained to assimilate ideals of the artist's sexuality that directly conflicted with his privileged nexus of art, sex and humanity, including the aesthetic ideal of sexual continence described in this thesis. While he found it easy enough to theorize the connection of art (as an abstract concept) to sex and humanity, his commitment to an ideal of self-contained, self-justifying art – 'art for art's sake' – was forever confounding Moore's conception of an interconnected world. This was particularly true in his considerations of the practical life of the artist in the world.

Moore frequently observed the tendency for the artist – particularly the 'good' or 'great' artist – to become both socially and sexually isolated, and the tendency of the practical and material processes of making such art to interrupt both the artist's sexuality and humanity. In this way the artist was constantly frustrating Moore's ideals of communality, in which art relies on and, he implies, assimilates and expresses sex and sociality. Thus in *Confessions* he writes: 'in me the impulse is so original to frequent the haunts of men that it is irresistible [...]. Contact with the world is in me the generating force; without this what invention I have is thin and sterile' (144-145). Yet earlier in the book he had presented a different view:

Like the midges that fret the surface of a shadowy stream, these men and women seemed to me; and though I laughed, danced, and made merry with them, I was not of them. [...] my friend became to me a study, a subject for dissection. [...] I used him without shame or stint. I used him as I have used all those with whom I have been brought into close contact (40, 42).

The very act of artistic observation seems to interrupt social interaction, which thus becomes coldly scientific, a 'dissection'. This word was part of the scientific language used to disparage Naturalism as a mode of naïve literary realism, and thus may have been meant disparagingly here. Anxiety about the detached artist was never far from Moore's work, though it is expressed in different ways. In *Memoirs* he notes that 'on account of his genius Verlaine was a little slow to see things outside of himself – all that was within him was clear, all without him obscure' (81). It is the ultimate isolation of the artist that provides much of the tension, particularly in *Confessions*, between individualism and community.

Moore frequently represented this separation as sexual as well as social. Like many others he used the words 'sterile' and 'lifeless' to describe bad art. In *Confessions* he describes Balzac and Shakespeare's styles as 'deeply impregnated with the savour of life', while George Meredith created 'sterile nuts' (271). Though ostensibly metaphorical, these pronouncements do imply a positive or defective relationship between the artist in question and 'life' (which, for Moore, became increasingly literal). To Moore art was clearly akin to sex, yet the artist, like the temperamental celibate, was constantly and mysteriously refusing this connection. In *Confessions* he worries over an obscure but admired musician: 'a blameless life is yours, no base thought has ever entered there, not even a woman's love; art and friends, that is all' (162). The young Moore idealizes the musician as a prophet of artistic comradeship, but the equation of 'a woman's love' with 'base thought' does not chime with Moore's other writing about sex, introducing instead a note of unease.

The disruption is nowhere more evident than in Moore's depiction, in *Avowals*, of his relationship with Pater, along with his descriptions of Pater in the

1916 preface to *Confessions*.⁴⁴ He begins in *Avowals* by praising *Marius the Epicurean* as an essentially ‘human’ book, exploring the universality of human nature rather than its specific manifestation in an individual. Yet on meeting its author, he is surprised to find that he is almost entirely without the ‘blithe humanities’ that Moore so highly valued. Pater’s manner is a ‘parade of courtesy and politeness’, a ‘quiet, old-maidish way’ that is, the narrator feels sure, concealing a ‘real self’ (189-190). He describes Pater as one ‘who wished above all things to preserve his real self for himself and to present to the world, even to his friends, a carefully prepared aspect – a mask’ (188). By 1919 the ‘mask’ had become a recognized way of referring to Pater’s personality, as James famously called him the ‘mask without the face’ and Edmund Gosse referred to Pater’s ‘courteous and gentle mask’.⁴⁵ It is now common to read these references as a guarded way of gesturing towards Pater’s homosexuality, but Moore’s emphasis is firmly upon the detachment rather than its possible cause. He sets himself to overcome this withdrawal, declaring that: ‘to attach Pater to other human beings, to rescue him from isolation, shall be my task’ (202).

In this narrative he represents himself as failing in his task. He eventually begins to ‘weary of Pater – of his shyness’ (209). Yet through this act of transposing Pater’s story into art, he claims that he has, in a sense, understood him, and in transmitting this understanding to others has indeed connected Pater to other people. Though in life Pater was ‘a mystery to us all’ (210), yet through imaginative sympathy, the humanity of art, he can appreciate the man, as it were, behind the mask. Observations of the personality of another from the outside are not, he claims, any less valid for being imaginative, as they chime with his experience of the universal

⁴⁴ George Moore, ‘Preface’, in *Confessions* (1916) vii-xiii.

⁴⁵ Letter from Henry James to Edmund Gosse, 13 December 1894, in *The Letters of Henry James*, ed. Percy Lubbock, 2 vols (London: Macmillan, 1920), vol. 1, 228; Edmund Gosse, ‘Walter Pater’, in *Critical Kit-Kats* (London: Heinemann, 1896), 239-72; 266.

humanity: ‘how human’, he says of Pater’s beloved Renaissance; ‘so human that it must have been as I dreamt it’ (202). And the same seems to go for Pater’s inner life. Pater was ‘a man who perhaps sought to open his heart to others, who wished to take the world into his confidence perhaps, but who found himself unable to meet a single friendship half way’. ‘Behind the mask’, Moore continues, ‘that he did not lift, that he could not lift was a shy, sentimental man’. Somehow, Pater’s detachment from ‘life’ is allowed to be consistent with artistic prowess. He was ‘all powerful in written word, impotent in life’ (212).

This reconciliation, however, of the socially and emotionally continent man with the ‘humane’ artist is not so successful as the narrator would have us believe. It chafes, first all, against all that Moore has elsewhere written about the similarities between art, sex and humanity. In order that we may not forget that the continent artist is generally a failure, Moore intersperses his portrait of Pater in later editions of *Avowals* with comments on what he sees as the failures of Henry James’s writing, which, unsurprisingly, stem from a lack of interest in sex. In the 1924 version Moore describes James, with reference to Matthew 19:12, as a ‘eunuch’ who ‘made himself a eunuch in the belief that to put manhood off would give him the power to observe mankind without guile’; but ‘the kingdom of heaven is not for the mutilated’.⁴⁶ Moore never directly addresses Pater’s sexual orientation, though it is gestured toward, as he describes Pater at dinner struggling to entertain ‘two ladies whose bosoms overflowed their bodies, large full-blown roses’ (209). As with John Norton and Edward Martyn, it is the lack of interest in women and, it is implied in the flower imagery, in sensuality in general that is emphasized, rather than a potential interest in men; but it is likely that Moore was aware of the rumours concerning Pater’s homosexual

⁴⁶ George Moore, *Avowals*, 2nd ed. (London: Heinemann, 1924).

inclination, especially after his death.⁴⁷ Pater's writing is, after all, used as an indicator of homosexuality, though continent homosexuality, in *A Mere Accident* and 'Hugh Monfert'. Again, homosexuality does not seem to constitute the 'sex' that Moore values, and is therefore treated as effectively equal to sexual continence in its relation to 'life'. But if James's sexual continence makes him a bad artist, why, we may ask, does not Pater's?

The idea of Pater as a man unfortunately trapped inside his own continence is undermined in Moore's narrative by the suggestion that Pater's withdrawal had been deliberate, something that he 'wished above all things'. This deliberate withdrawal is more explicitly addressed in the 1916 preface to *Confessions*:

Pater always held the end in view; and his rule of life never to separate himself wholly from his art came out of an instinct; his art was to him what the nest is to the sitting bird; were he to remain away for long, he might find the nest disarranged or himself might be changed.⁴⁸

Though the rationale here is unclear – Moore is attempting to describe a delicate sense of artistic integrity – what is clear is that Pater is seen as having reserved himself from humanity and sex, and it is implied that this reserve is crucial to his art. The word 'instinct', so often coupled by Moore with sensuality and women, is especially important here. This theory of artistic production is not as alien to Moore as his louder statements on the importance of sex to art may suggest. In the 1907 'Apologia', alongside his declarations that, 'there is but one energy, and the vital fluid, whether expended in love or in a poem, is the same', he also reports that Balzac had refrained from sex in order to accentuate his artistic ability, 'maintaining that great spiritual elation could be gained by restraint' (1907, xxii). Such restraint from

⁴⁷ For the circulation of these rumours, see Denis Donoghue, *Walter Pater: Lover of Strange Souls* (New York: Knopf, 1995), 59-61.

⁴⁸ Moore, 'Preface' to *Memoirs of My Dead Life* (1907), ix.

sex, Moore claims, need not be applied to everyone as a moral standard; we do not find Balzac ‘praising chastity as a virtue, but extolling the results that may be gotten from chastity as a Yogi might’ (1907, xxiii).

In the ‘Apologia’ he does not address the question of whether Balzac is right in his supposition that restraint in sex can yield a heightened ability in art. Elsewhere, however, we find Moore explicitly claiming exactly that. In an 1892 article ‘Sex in Art’, collected in the volume *Modern Painting* (1893), Moore explicitly discusses the place that sex must take in the life of the artist. ‘Sex’, he writes, ‘is as important an element in a work of art as it is in life; all art that lives is full of sex’.⁴⁹ So far this is consistent with the ‘one energy’ of the ‘Apologia’: but then he continues, ‘I do not mean that the artist must have led a profligate life; I mean, indeed, the very opposite’. In explanation of this statement, he offers a radical reimagining of ‘sex’ that conflates it with ‘life’, but in a particularly materialistic form. ‘I mean by sex’, he says, ‘that concentrated essence of life which the great artist jealously reserves for his art, and through which it pulsates’. As usual when Moore invokes the concept of ‘life’, and as when Lee did the same, we are left with an abundance of unanswered questions. The connection between sex and life, and their importance to art, seems tautologically clear: ‘art that lives’ is ‘full of sex’ because sex is a vital force, an intense form of ‘life’ (whatever that is). What is not so clear is what life or sex actually are; whether, for example, ‘sex’ in this sense includes intercourse, and how it is transferred, whether into art or elsewhere. This confusion increases as Moore continues with a concession: ‘profligate, I am afraid, history proves the artist sometime to have been’, and ‘his profligacy is only ephemeral and circumstantial; what is abiding in him is chastity of mind, though not always of body’ (222). In typical Moore fashion, what

⁴⁹ George Moore, ‘Sex in Art’, in *Modern Painting* (London: Walter Scott, 1893), 220-31; 221. All further references will be to this edition and given in the text. First published as ‘Sex in Art, I’, *The Speaker*, 5 (18 June, 1892), 737-38 and ‘Sex in Art, II’, 5 (25 June, 1892), 766-78.

had sounded very material, even literally seminal – the phrase ‘concentrated essence of life’ could have been taken from a quack medical pamphlet – within a few sentences becomes much more elusive, an emotional rather than physical state, ‘chastity of mind, though not always of body’, reminiscent instead of Frederick Faber’s anxiety over whether there may not be a ‘*moral* continence’ as well as a physical one (cf. 95). In ‘Sex in Art’, this explicit expansion of continence to include the mental as well as the physical aspects of sexual experience leads Moore to connect a misogynistic, anti-domestic, anti-bourgeois discourse with that of Aesthetic continence (to a degree foreign to Pater, Johnson, and Lee). ‘It is certain’, he goes on, ‘that woman occupies but a small part in the life of an artist. She is never more than a charm, a relaxation, in his life; and even when he strains her to his bosom, oceans are between them’ (222).

Moore expands upon this theory in *Hail and Farewell*. In the first volume he admires John Eglinton for his bachelor life. Though, he says, ‘we are all inclined to think that man is never so much man as when he is in pursuit of the female’, yet ‘perhaps he is never less man than at that moment’ (vol. 1, 163). He continues:

The man of whom I am dreaming, shy, unobtrusive and lonely, whose interests are literary, and whose life is not troubled by women, feels intensely and hoards in his heart secret enthusiasms and sentiments which in other men flow in solution here and there down any feminine gutter (vol. 1, 164).

Moore’s attitude towards women has recently been reassessed as ‘progressive’, or even ‘feminist’.⁵⁰ But sometimes we see his association of women with sensuality shading into misogyny. The ‘feminine gutter’ evidently does not constitute a worthy

⁵⁰ See, for example, Ann Heilmann and María Elena Jaime de Pablos, ‘Alice Barton: A Portrait of the Artist as a Young (New) Woman?’, in *George Moore: Influence and Collaboration*, eds Heilmann and Llewellyn, 99-121; Mary Pierse, ‘No More than a Sketch’, in *George Moore: Across Borders*, eds Dabringeon-Garcier and Huguet, 161-76; 167.

receptacle for those 'secret enthusiasms and sentiments'. We see here an opposite rhetorical movement from that in 'Sex in Art'; instead of a seemingly physical continence becoming emotional, here the emotional continence of a man who 'hoards in his heart' becomes material, with the seminal image of 'flow in solution'. Again we see a return of Victorian medical discourse in describing the sexuality of the artist. As in 'Sex in Art', relationships with women seem to threaten a loss of something that would otherwise mature into an intense, personal, artistic experience. 'Sex in Art' claims that 'the great artist and Don Juan are irreparably antagonistic; one cannot contain the other' (222), a statement which suggests that some limitation of physical sexuality is certainly desirable in the artist. This does not sit easily with the notion that the 'chastity' required is purely an emotional erotic continence, and that an artist need merely refrain from emotional attachment in order to retain 'sex' for his art. It is difficult to escape the conclusion that, in Moore's representation, the life of the good artist will not include a great amount of sexual activity; and that his rationale for this includes, even if it is not limited to, the idea that abstinence from sexual acts has positive benefits for the individual, if that individual be an artist.

There is another key difference between Moore's configuration of productive sexual continence, and that of Pater, Johnson, and Lee. While it is possible to read the ideas of continence elaborated by the other three as effectively transforming the sexual into something else, thus distinguishing between the product and the thing transformed, no such reading of Moore's work is possible. For him, that which is contained, whether a material substance or an emotional quality, remains sexual. It is, in fact, precisely because this mysterious substance or force is imagined as part of 'sex' (in the widened sense in which he uses the term), that continence can be used to reconcile artistic withdrawal with Moore's high valuation of sex, and Moore is able

to sustain his idea of sex and art as categories intimately related and both enabling access to the universal, to 'life'. In imagining continence as an intensification and redirection of sex rather than its effective transformation, Moore should be understood as partaking in a shift in sexual discourse, during which 'sex' was increasingly imagined as an all-encompassing quantity, moving towards what Arnold I. Davidson calls psychiatric 'sexuality' as opposed to anatomical 'sex', and its potential transformation into something else, or even total eradication, was greeted with increasing scepticism; a shift of which Freud's theory of 'sublimation' would become the most enduring product. His engagement with the discourse of Aesthetic productive sexual continence, however, suggests a continued attraction to that discourse despite frequent repetition of seemingly contrary ideas.

This manner of conceiving of the successful artist as one who abstains from sexual acts, but in doing so retains and even intensifies something also called 'sex' which contributes towards his art, explains Moore's otherwise strange announcement of his own sexual impotence in *Hail and Farewell*. Just as in the *Celibates* stories a general impulse towards elucidation bred multiple stories of origin, so here Moore offers a range of explanations for his sexual debility. One, as quoted earlier, was the excessive amorousness of his current lover: it 'would have been the same earlier in my life as it was now' (vol. 3, 275). Another is that he has reached a time of life when attempts at sexual activity swiftly and directly damage his health. He tells of a final attempt: 'the encounter of our lips sent the blood rushing to my head, and so violently that for ten minutes I lay where I had fallen on the sofa, holding my splitting temples. "My time for love encounters is over," I said, reaching out my hand to her sadly' (vol. 3, 287-88). The association of sexual excess with both blood and the head is particularly reminiscent of Victorian medical discourse, with its echoes of old theories

concerning the relationship of semen with the blood and with the brain (cf. 50). He then represents himself as deliberately renouncing an activity that is undignified for older men. 'Love', he writes, 'is for the young and for the middle-aged, and I was growing old, the love of the senses was burning out, and it would be better to quench it by a sudden resolve than to keep blowing upon the ashes, undignified and unhealthy, the folly of fools' (vol. 3, 284). It is this element of choice gives the impression that Moore's impotence is, like that of Pater ('impotent in life'), at least partly elective, and so qualifies as aesthetic continence. William Acton had offered similar advice to the aging man. 'The ordinary rule seems to be', he writes, 'that the sexual power is not retained by the male to any considerable amount after the age of sixty or sixty-five': those desiring to extend sexual activity beyond this age should be warned of the threat both to their health and to that of their partners, and are told that though 'no immediate mischief has yet occurred', nevertheless 'libertinage is [...] bad enough at any age; in an elderly man it is a crime, and one that I will not lend myself to abet'.⁵¹

Finally we find Moore considering, as if none of the previous conclusions had occurred, whether to take a wife to keep him company in old age, to have a child whom he could educate to become a great musician, and in this way to leave a legacy behind him. This fantasy quickly becomes a symbolic decision between a life of sex and sensuality, associated as usual with 'blithe humanities', and one of a withdrawn and continent art. He imagines himself looking around a French villa (Grubgeld has indicated that often for Moore 'French is used as a secret sexual code'), the garden suggestively full of flowering but currently fruitless pomegranate trees ('*grenadier*' [vol. 3, 359]), which looks out over a town that the owner tells him is the birthplace of

⁵¹ William Acton, *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, in Adult Age, and in Advanced Life: Considered in their Physiological, Social, and Psychological Relations*, 2nd ed. (London: John Churchill, 1858; first published 1857), 99, 98.

Rabelais.⁵² He considers buying it as a home for himself and his imaginary wife and child. ‘Why not?’ he asks himself; but an inner voice returns the answer: ‘Because *Hail and Farewell* must be written’ (vol. 3, 360). He then represents himself as nobly giving up his potential family, his friends, his native country, in order to write a book; but a book that will connect him to people, particularly the people of Ireland, in a way that would be impossible without such sacrifice. *Hail and Farewell* will (he claims), ‘be the turning-point in Ireland’s destiny’ (vol. 3, 361), a new ‘sacred book’ (vol. 3, 291). This matches his earlier assertions that his new state of impotence, whether imposed upon him by nature or freely chosen, will give him a new kind of influence, especially with the Irish, as ‘celibacy is set above all the other virtues in Ireland’. ‘Nature is not a humorist’, he continues; ‘She intends to redeem Ireland from Catholicism and has chosen me as her instrument, and has cast chastity upon me so that I may be able to do her work’. ‘I have come’, he imagines himself declaring, ‘to the most impersonal country in the world to preach personality – personal love and personal religion’; but he can preach individualism in this manner only if he is himself detached, impersonal (vol. 3, 290). His melting together of different rationalizations here forces his readers’ attention all the more clearly towards the essential, continuous elements: that he is renouncing sex, along with some of the humanity that it gives one access to, and expects to gain something from it, some sort of prophetic authority, a mysterious access to humanity in general, which will enable him to write his masterpiece. There is, again, clearly an element of humour here, but with Moore it is difficult to judge where self-parody ends, if it ever ends, and seriousness begins. One may be reminded that Pater, Johnson, and Lee all associate continence with the universal, the general, in a way that gives one a special

⁵² Grubgeld, *The Autogenous Self*, 13.

position and authority to speak: of Johnson's imagining himself as a continent priest guiding all humanity, and Lee's representations of continence as a way of accessing the 'general life'. One may also remember Moore's description of Pater as 'all powerful in written word, impotent in life'.

But is Moore really renouncing sex entirely, as he understands it, or just physical sexual activity? Even if 'between fifty and sixty we discover that our love-life is over and done', still, he continues, 'our interest in sex [...] remains the same, but it is an intellectual interest, changed, transformed, lifted out of the flesh'. Again for Moore this interest, however 'intellectual' and 'transformed', is still categorized as 'sex' because it is directed entirely towards women: 'our eyes follow the movement of the body under the silken gown, a well-turned neck and shapely bosom please us, and we like to look into feminine eyes and read the feminine soul' (vol. 3, 288). As in 'Sex in Art', we see 'sex' divided into two possible manifestations: the one uncongenial towards art, but the other, though physically inactive, beneficial to it. Throughout his work, it is possible to read Moore as playing with the idea of an artistically productive continent sexuality, particularly through his use of aesthetic reminiscence in the autobiographical form.

Memory

In 1916 Max Beerbohm produced a caricature of Moore standing next to a tombstone, dressed in mourning clothes, with the legend:

Elegy on Any Lady, by G. M.
That she adored me as the most
Adorable of males
I think I may securely boast.

Dead women tell no tales.⁵³

The implication – that Moore’s tales of amorous adventures were not only not provably false, but conveniently also impossible to prove as true – shows just how deeply Moore’s literary and public persona had become associated with a particular type of sexual reverie, ‘rooted’, in Frazier’s words, ‘in actual relationship, but elaborated apart and away from basic family-founding acts of procreation’.⁵⁴ Moore’s most sustained effort to reconcile the potentially continent artist with the ideal of an interconnected world is identifiable in his use of this kind of sexual reminiscence. Moore was in his thirties when he wrote his first autobiography, *Confessions of a Young Man*. By 1905, according to Frazier, he had come to recognize that his strength as an artist lay in this genre, though ‘he never got over wanting to be a great novelist and a great playwright’.⁵⁵ As we have seen, each of his autobiographical works used the events and people of his life to weave a self-consciously artistic work, at the centre of which was his own changing persona. A core component of this persona, from his first sojourn in London in the 1890s onwards, was sexual memory, regardless of whether the reminiscence were of actual or fictional experiences. As Frazier puts it, ‘the sexual impulse to rarify and prolong and decorate a desire was interwoven with the literary impulse itself’, and ‘in his case, art is the protraction into the future of a past desire, or into the present of a future possible desire, so that its beauty might be endlessly re-examined’.⁵⁶ Katherine Snyder has examined the bachelor attitude of sexual nostalgia or reverie, as a literary motif or technique in the

⁵³ N. John Hall ed., *Max Beerbohm Caricatures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 46. For discussion of this caricature and more on Moore’s relationship with Beerbohm, see Marie-Claire Honard, ‘Max the Caricature and Moore: Crossing the Boundaries of Friendship’, in *George Moore: Across Borders*, eds Dabringeon-Garcier and Huguet, 161-76.

⁵⁴ Frazier, *George Moore*, 183.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xv, 206-7.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

late nineteenth century, related to a particular mode of masculinity that preserves its ambivalent relationship with both sexual transgression and normativity: 'the bachelor in his reveries is defined by the intensity of his inner life, inner life which imaginatively crosses the divides between fantasy and reality, and between self and other'.⁵⁷ Moore both takes on and parodies this role through a sexual continence that he portrays alternately as self-imposed and involuntary.

Memory was essential to Moore's conception of artistic practice. This becomes particularly explicit during his time in Ireland, when it is likely that he was, as he claimed to be, heavily influenced there by Irish writer friends such as Yeats and AE (George Russell), and their emphasis on the relationship between literary narrative and oral story-telling. But Moore's attraction to memory had been evident from his earliest work. Llewellyn looks at Moore's privileging of remembered rather than immediate experience in his early poetry, while Uslenghi has shown the centrality of memory to Moore's post-1890s artistic style, an argument which Grubgeld has elaborated upon.⁵⁸ Memory, Uslenghi claims, not only allowed Moore to detach his art from all extraneous connections, but also acted as a filtering tool, allowing the artist, when representing a past event artistically, to perceive the formally necessary elements of a narrative and thus create a streamlined simplicity.⁵⁹ I would add that this relationship between the methods of art and of memory also occasionally allowed him to pass off the necessary labour of selection and reworking of art as the more involuntary filtering of memory. This process can be seen in the Preface to the 1925 edition of *Hail and Farewell*, 'Art Without the Artist', in which Moore claims that the book was simply a transcription from 'Nature': 'for years I

⁵⁷ Katherine V. Snyder, *Bachelors, Manhood and the Novel, 1850-1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 62.

⁵⁸ Mark Llewellyn, "'Pagan Moore": Poetry, Painting, and Passive Masculinity in George Moore's *Flowers of Passion* (1877) and *Pagan Poems* (1881)', *Victorian Poetry*, 45:1 (Spring, 2007), 77-92.

⁵⁹ Uslenghi, 'A Perspective of Unity', 213-21; see also Grubgeld, *The Autogenous Self*, 232-50.

believed myself to be the author of *Hail and Farewell*, whereas I was nothing more than the secretary'.⁶⁰ Cave questions this representation of the artistic process, saying of the three-volume work that 'a studied artistry guides the seemingly artless fluctuations of the narrative'.⁶¹

Sexual reminiscence in Moore's work is often found in conjunction with his depreciation of marriage and reproduction, as he developed an ideal of diffuse, self-justifying sexual pleasure which, though it relied on the idea of initial experience (whether actual or fictional), was made more intense not through repeated experience, but through autoerotic acts of memory. Frazier writes that:

Love for Moore only becomes an art when it ceases to be reproductive. He is happiest when sex is polymorphous: that is, when it is transferred from genital intercourse to touch and talk, to sight and speculation, where it can be indefinitely prolonged through thought.⁶²

These comments were made in relation to Moore's personal sex life; but it is also enlightening when applied to his writing, and the indefinite prolongation of sex that he cultivated through retrospective rumination. In *Confessions*, for example, a non-reproductive ideal is defined through a Decadent antipathy to domesticity and marriage:

Marriage – what an abomination! Love – yes, but not marriage. Love cannot exist in marriage, because love is an ideal; that is to say, something not quite understood – transparencies, colour, light, a sense of the unreal. But a wife – you know all about her – who her father was, who her mother was, what she thinks of you and her opinion of the neighbours across the way. Where, then, is the dream, the *au delà*? [...] The unknown, the unreal. Thus love is possible. There is a delusion, an *au delà* (168, 169).

⁶⁰ George Moore, 'Art Without the Artist', in *Hail and Farewell*, ed. Richard Cave (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1976; first published 1925), 47-53; 51.

⁶¹ Cave, 'Introduction', *ibid.*, 23.

⁶² Frazier, *George Moore*, 356.

In the 1889 version here quoted, the difference between love and marriage is one of domestic familiarity and disillusion, the strangling of the imaginative ideal by everyday experience. In the 1904 edition, however, this difference is explicitly related to reproduction: 'Marriage means a four-post bed and papa and mama'. Marriage is scorned for its boring, reproductive sexuality, while the ideal relationship seems even further from consummation: 'But the woman one has never seen before', he cries, 'that one will never see again!'⁶³ 'Love' for the narrator of the *Confessions* is almost entirely an autoerotic experience, barely relying on another person at all, an act of imagination more than relation.

This model of non-reproductive, imaginative sexuality is returned to and expanded on in *Memoirs of My Dead Life*. 'We humans are more complicated than animals', he writes, 'and we love through the imagination'. This time imagination is represented as contributing to an original experience, rather than constituting the whole of it: 'at least', he continues, 'the imagination stimulates the senses, acting as a sort of adjuvant' (59-60). The memoir, in this understanding of 'love', is an imaginative elaboration upon something already, in the moment of experience, heavily augmented by imagination. The long chapter entitled 'The Lovers of Orelay', in which the memory of a probably real encounter (with Maud Cunard in Aix-le-Bains, 1894) is remembered and liberally embroidered upon, is almost entirely constituted of sexual delay.⁶⁴ And as accident upon accident further obstructs the movement of the couple towards consummation, a gap seems to open between narrator and protagonist despite the two nominally being the same person, as the protagonist's frustration seems at odds with the narrator's lingering over the details of postponement. Though sexual intercourse is achieved at the end of the story, it is

⁶³ George Moore, *Confessions of a Young Man*, 3rd ed. (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1904), 130.

⁶⁴ For Moore's affair with Maud Cunard in Aix-le-Bains, see Frazier, *George Moore*, 245-48.

constantly suggested by the narrator that the protagonist's focus on this end is degrading. As he becomes increasingly focused upon consummation, we see also his appreciation of both humanity and art degenerating. 'Wherever human beings collect', he says, 'there is always to be found somebody of interest, but when one's interest is centred in a lady everyone else becomes an enemy' (173). His interest in aesthetics and landscape suffers, as he moans 'I am in no mood to describe the Leonardo-like mountains enframing the azure bay' (174). As sex is limited to intercourse, it ceases to be the communicative power, the epitome of 'life' that Moore elsewhere represents it to be. In another chapter, the narrator remembers visiting a lover who has grown old. He soon determines to visit her no more, in order to cease mitigating his memory with fresh experience. 'In order to possess her', he realizes, 'I must never see her again' (72).

Models of minimal interaction and subsequent autoeroticism through reverie are found throughout Moore's autobiographical work, though not in his fiction. This discrepancy is partly due to the autobiographical form, in which all sexual encounters are necessarily remembered ones. But it also suggests that this is an ideal not for humanity in general, for the very various people represented in his novels, but specifically for the artist. Moore is of course aware that a non-reproductive ideal cannot be carried out by a large number of people if a nation's population is to be maintained. The narrator of *Confessions* says to himself:

But it is you who are monstrous, you who expect to fashion the whole world in conformity with your aestheticisms. [...] a vain dream, and if realised it would result in an impossible world. A wife and children are the basis of existence (167).

Only a small number, an aesthetic elite, he suggests, can or even should realize an ideal of a detached, intellectual or imaginative sexuality, indulged through memory more than repeated experience.

Moore's declaration of sexual impotence in *Hail and Farewell*, for example, can be read as an attempt to reconcile sex and art by enforcing the cultivation of non-reproductive, imaginative, 'intellectual' sexuality. Reading in this way makes it possible to understand the connection he makes between his sexual continence and individualism (his preaching of 'personality – personal love, personal religion') as well as his imagining of himself as introducing contraception to Ireland, since impotence is represented as the ultimate non-reproductive sexual state. Such a reading also makes sense of his repeated assertion that sexual continence is less aesthetically offensive than actual sexual activity, especially for an ugly man such as himself (as he claims), and after the age of fifty. Reimagining again the 'Lovers of Orelay' episode, he writes: 'this love-story was no frolic of nymph and satyr, but a disgraceful exhibition of Beauty and the Beast' (vol. 3, 287). The aesthetic is connected, not to lack of sexuality, but to a sexuality intensified and prolonged through restraint. The connection between art and sex is represented as being essentially limited to the realm of imagination, with the real experience being marred by the world's refusal to be always beautiful.

It is appropriate, therefore, that Moore follows his meditation on the advantages of sexual continence with an explicit account of the process of writing; we are increasingly encouraged to view the narrator as one who, sexually and otherwise, reflects and represents rather than experiences. He portrays the three volumes of *Hail and Farewell* as a delicately planned artistic structure, and himself more as one who crafts this structure than as the inventor of the content: 'any

straying', he says, 'would have been fatal, so intricate are the windings of the story I had been chosen to tell' (vol. 3, 292). Between the lines of Moore's grandiose claims to have been nominated by the Gods as Ireland's saviour, we see him gradually shaping himself as a credible artist whose book, if not perhaps the 'sacred book' that he claims it to be, will plausibly be good. This episode signals the final development of Moore's persona, adopted after the publication of *Hail and Farewell*, in which the worldly old uncle became a combination of the Grand Old Man of Letters and an impersonal prophet, a medium for what is universal or eternal in the world. Sexual continence was crucial to this persona.

This last evolution in Moore's character included a renewed attention to religious celibacy. Throughout his career Moore had made frequent statements against the Catholic Church to which his family still adhered, including a public declaration of his apostasy in a letter to the *Irish Times* in 1903.⁶⁵ Criticism of the enforced celibacy of the priesthood and religious houses made up a large part of his vitriol. *The Lake* (1905, rewritten 1921) revolves around an Irish priest's simultaneous discovery of sex and 'life', while *Evelyn Innes* (1898, rewritten 1908) and its sequel *Sister Teresa* (1901, rewritten 1909) portray an opposite movement, with Evelyn's attraction to the convent presented as the result of her fear of both sex and 'life'. The ending to *Hail and Farewell* can also, of course, be read as anti-Catholic in tone, as Moore claims that his sexual impotence gives him an ascendancy over Irish Catholics: 'the Irish people will listen to my exhortations now that I have become the equal of the priest, the nun, and the ox' (vol. 3, 289). But Moore's public embracing of his impotence, and comparison of this new state to that of religious celibacy, was more than mere mockery of the Catholic Church. In 1914 he undertook

⁶⁵ George Moore, 'Mr. George Moore and the Roman Church', *Irish Times* (24 September, 1903), 5. For more on this incident, see Frazier, *George Moore*, 332-33.

a journey to the Holy Land as research for a book on the subject, and in 1916 published *The Brook Kerith*, a revision of the life of Jesus in which he does not die on the cross, but is rescued and goes on to live as a shepherd in a celibate community. Moore's treatment of this community, the Essenes, is far more ambivalent than his treatment of similar subjects in earlier works. Like his later 'celibate' stories, this novel often seems to connect celibacy rather than sex with the mystery and unity at the heart of all things, the brook itself seeming 'to rise out of the very centre of the earth'.⁶⁶ And while Jesus finally realizes that God 'put into the heart of man love of woman, and into the heart of woman love of man' because 'he wishes both to enjoy that love', this new found tolerance does not extend to himself. Jesus remains, like Moore at the end of *Hail and Farewell*, the celibate prophet, preaching the wisdom that his separation from mankind has allowed him to discover.⁶⁷

Moore may, however, have misjudged the ability of the next generation to read his self-proclaimed impotence through this traditional discourse of productive sexual continence. He was not ignored by the younger literary elite: Virginia Woolf, reviewing a new edition of *Esther Waters*, wrote that 'Mr. Moore is a born writer; and, though great novelists are rare, of how many people in a generation can one say truthfully that?' Yet those who paid court to him at Ebury Street in London often characterized him as cold and inhumane.⁶⁸ Ford Madox Ford, for example, wrote that Moore 'seemed aloof as if he had been a denizen of another world where there was neither sun nor wind. The impression was so strong that I was relieved that he did not remove his hand from the door knob and offer it to me'. His writings, Ford continues, offer the same impression. While admitting that they are excellently written, he complains 'you felt mentally distressed at merely remembering the writings of George

⁶⁶ George Moore, *The Brook Kerith: A Syrian Story* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1916), 293.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 434.

⁶⁸ Virginia Woolf, 'A Born Writer', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 967 (29 July, 1920), 485.

Moore – as if you were making acquaintance of what goes on in the mind behind the glacial gaze of the serpent that is the Enemy of Man'.⁶⁹ Charles Morgan (playwright and Moore's appointed biographer, though a full-length biography was never written) in his 1935 *Epitaph for George Moore* wrote of the 'physical repulsion' that some people felt on visiting Moore. To account for this reaction Morgan claims that Moore had, in the effort to squash his irresponsible former self in order to become instead a Great Artist, somehow destroyed the part of himself that had been human. 'Self-creation was the end', he says, 'self-discipline the means, and the penalty he had to pay for this everlasting labour of the spirit, compelling the man he had been to bring forth the man he would become, was an exhaustion of the vital energy given by others to the joy, the ease, the warmth, the natural humanity of living'.⁷⁰

Osbert Burdett, in a 1915 poem called 'The Choice', attributed this cold inhumanity directly to Moore's sexuality. The choice in question is between the lifestyle of George Borrow, and that of George Moore. The first offers 'green lanes or corn-fields, / The steaming, hot sex of the earth'; the latter 'The life in the Temple, the lonely / The bookish, the bachelor hours'.⁷¹ For the literary generation coming of age after the death of Victoria, sexual continence no longer so readily signalled a state of discipline and production in the way that it had for their parents and grandparents. They did not, it seems, generally read Moore's insistence on his impotence as evidence that he was a Great Artist, for whom sex had come to mean 'that concentrated essence of life' which he 'jealously reserves for his art, and through which it pulsates'. Instead, they read him as one of his own celibates, failing in humanity and art as he failed in sex, and so ultimately failing too in 'life'.

⁶⁹ Quoted in Charles Morgan, *Epitaph on George Moore* (London: Macmillan, 1935), 17, 18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷¹ Osbert Burdett, 'The Choice', in *Songs of Exuberance, Together with The Trenches* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1915), 137-38; 137 [lines 5-6].

Conclusion

The idea of productive sexual continence did not die with the birth of the new century. We have seen in Chapter One how it continued into the twentieth century in social purity campaigns, in the Scouting Movement, and in the rhetoric of suffragette agitation. Lesley Hall has shown how fears about the health risks associated with seminal losses even within marriage continued well into the 1920s and '30s, and were frequently expressed in the letters received by Marie Stopes from male readers, in response to her books on sexual health, reproduction and 'married love'.¹ Evidently there was a shift in sexual understanding in the first half of the twentieth century that eventually allowed the 'sexual revolution' of the 1960s. The previously widespread paranoia concerning sexual excess as a potential problem affecting the ordinary daily lives of both men and women gave way to what has been called a more 'permissive' sexual system; and while the freedoms allowed by such permissiveness must not be over-stated, it is true nevertheless that worries about excess became a minor rather than a major part of everyday sexual discourse. There have been many attempts to explain or account for, or even simply to describe accurately this discursive shift. Foucault has characterized it as an inevitable development of the post-Enlightenment 'discursive explosion' concerning sexuality, and Laurence Birken as the means by which consumer-based capitalism produces both the individualism and desire necessary to the perfect consumer. Meanwhile Arnold I. Davidson has described it as the point at which one 'style of reasoning' gave way to another, 'anatomical' to

¹ Lesley A. Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900-1950* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 129-30.

‘psychiatric’.² But within this pattern of general change across the early part of the twentieth century in particular, the logic of productive continence found new life, often being grafted upon newer understandings of sexuality, though it might be shorn in the process of previous ‘ethical content’. This is particularly true in thinking about the relationship between sexuality and art.

For example, the work of many other writers active in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, regardless of whether their dominant mode of representing sexuality is similar, different or even contradictory to that of the Aesthetic writers explored here, are responsive to readings attentive to the idea of productive sexual continence. One such writer is Henry James, whose sexuality has been the cause of much academic curiosity and controversy. Wendy Graham, rather than interpret his life as either entirely celibate or consciously homosexual, has written of James as ‘one who practised sexual abstinence both to forestall nervous collapse and to conserve energy for work’, suggesting a sexual practice related to the discourse explored by this thesis.³ Graham sets out to ‘read James’s sexuality and its textual reverberations in a manner scrupulously attentive to the historically available terms at his disposal’, and to show his sexuality as ‘exemplary of nineteenth-century sexuality rather than as idiosyncratic’. But though the sources that she draws on to some extent overlap with those outlined by this thesis, ‘mental hygiene, energy conservation, sexology, psychiatry, and cultural anthropology’, she does not read his attempts to ‘forge an erotic economy of artistic production’ alongside the similar efforts of other nineteenth-century writers.⁴ Like Moore and others – Bridges, Symonds, Yeats, and

² Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 1998; this translation first published 1978; first published in French as *La volonté de savoir*, 1976), 17; Lawrence Birken, *Consuming Desire: Sexual Science and the Emergence of a Culture of Abundance, 1871-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

³ Wendy Graham, *Henry James’s Thwarted Love* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2, 4, 2.

Bernard Shaw, to name a few – James can be read as continuing to assimilate various sexual models as he aged into the twentieth century, and as reconciling those with elements of nineteenth-century productive sexual continence that remained attractive even where their physiological underpinnings were doubted. Reading his work, especially that which considers artistic ethics such as *Roderick Hudson* (1875) and *The Tragic Muse* (1890), as an engagement with a recognizable tradition of productive sexual continence within late nineteenth-century culture, especially Aestheticism – an engagement which included both attraction and reaction – could shed light upon the relationship between James's vacillating response to sexuality, and his attempts to form an ethics of artistry outside of Paterian Aestheticism.

A similar approach might also perhaps widen our understanding of the manner in which Modernist writers responded to, assimilated, and adapted Victorian models of artistry. In 1921 Ezra Pound was, according to a biographer, 'speculating about a possible proof from natural science for his conviction that the mind was energized by the power of sex'.⁵ Fascinated throughout his career with the possibility of a physical basis of artistic genius, Pound seems to have oscillated between extreme theories as the mood took him. Many of these owe a great deal to the nineteenth-century discourse of sexual continence as artistically productive. This has not, however, been fully recognized by biographers, who have often read his insinuations on the importance of sex to art as validating the artist's promiscuity. That another approach may be possible can be seen from Pound's 1922 postscript to his translation of Remy de Gourmont's *The Natural Philosophy of Love*, in which he produced a text that reads almost as a parody of Gourmont's system-making, and at the same time as a compilation of similar attempts, from Victorian medical texts to twentieth-century

⁵ A. David Moody, *Ezra Pound: Poet*, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), vol. 2, 9.

anthropology and psychology. Despite a lifestyle that was far from continent, Pound nevertheless reminds us that ‘man has for centuries nibbled at this idea of connection, intimate connection between his sperm and his cerebration’, and offers as a contribution to the ongoing debate surrounding this idea the theory that the brain is itself made of coagulated sperm, ‘a sort of great clot of genital fluid held in suspense or reserve’. This absurdly imitates the folk belief derided by William Acton that loss of sperm could in extreme cases entail a loss of actual brain matter (cf. 50), and Pound acknowledges this medical heritage, writing that he is proposing only ‘an idea which really surprises no one, but seems as if it might have been lying on the study table of any physician or philosopher’. From this he derives a blurred and occasionally self-contradictory theory of continence as a means to produce intensification of energy, figuring the ‘genius, the “strong-minded”’ as ‘discharging apparently only a surplus at high pressure’ of the ‘fluid’ that lies in the brain.⁶ He creates, by means of a fantasy physiology, a sexual theory similar in many ways to that of George Moore, in which retention and rechanneling of sperm is appropriate for the artist because it strengthens the mind, and especially the impulses in the mind that lead to the creation of art (cf. 283). Sexual continence results in the ‘bathing of the cerebral tissues in the residuum, in *la mousse* of the life sap’, and this bathing, roughly, creates an intensification of energy necessary for creation, whether sexual or artistic.

It is unclear how serious (or not) Pound was being in this Postscript. By March 1922, he was apparently ‘happy to dismiss most of the scientific or pseudo-scientific postulates of his “Postscript” as “various statements now antiquated” and

⁶ Ezra Pound, ‘Translator’s Postscript’, in Remy de Gourmont, *The Natural Philosophy of Love*, trans. Ezra Pound (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1922; originally published in French as *Physique de l’Amour: Essai sur l’Instinct Sexuel*, 1903), 206-19; 218, 206, 207, 206.

“speculations neither supported nor disproved”⁷. And yet, according to one biographer, Pound’s American publisher James Laughlin remembered him expounding similar theories in the 1930s, and speculated that this was why Pound always sat or lay with his head as far back as possible: “‘Fluids don’t run uphill,” observes Laughlin. “The poet reclined as much as possible to facilitate and increase the flow of spermatozoa from his balls to his bean””. Whatever one’s opinion on this point, it seems unlikely that the ‘Postscript’ could have been written without an awareness of both the nineteenth-century discourse of productive sexual continence – or at least, the part thereof which associated continence with individual gain – and its rewriting into the Freudian theory of sublimation. (This despite Pound’s supposed labelling of Freud’s writing as ‘unmitigated shit [...] laid out in most elegant arabesques’.)⁸ Attentiveness to this context could lead to new readings of Pound’s thinking about sexuality and art; especially when combined, for example, with his admiration for the work of Lionel Johnson, whose poems he edited and used as an example of the positive value of ‘hardness’ in poetry, though he felt him to be a greater critic than poet.⁹

The twenty-first century has also seen adaptations of the discourse of productive sexual continence. While such practices are now associated more firmly with athletes than artists, the Internet has recently given rise to communities in which the fear of pornography addiction is not only expressed in terms highly reminiscent of nineteenth-century medical and quack literature, but also connected, if often tentatively, to creativity. These communities, almost entirely male and with a largely (though by no means exclusively) white American profile, are made up of people who

⁷ Moody, *Ezra Pound*, vol. 2, 10.

⁸ Humphrey Carpenter, *A Serious Character: The Life of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), 394, 395.

⁹ Lionel Johnson, *Poetical Works*, ed. Ezra Pound (London: Elkin Mathews, 1915); Ezra Pound, ‘The Hard and the Soft in French Poetry’, *Poetry*, 11:5 (February, 1918), 264-71; 267.

display extreme anxiety concerning the possibly far-reaching negative effects of masturbation. Many groups, boards, and forums are dedicated to discussion of the giving up of pornography and/or masturbation, and give rise to discussions not only of masturbation's negative effects but also of the equally far-reaching benefits of even temporary periods of abstinence (mostly outside of, but sometimes also within relationships). A lot of these communities are religious (Christian, Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim can be readily found), but the last five years have seen the rise of secular communities, the most prominent being NoFap ('fap' being an onomatopoeic word used in manga comics to indicate masturbation), founded by a self-described recovered porn addict, Alexander Rhodes, in June 2011. There is nothing to suggest that the members of NoFap are socially marginal, though a great deal of their anxiety concerns the extent to which pornography and masturbation may be disallowing them from participating fully in the 'normal' social relationships to which they aspire.¹⁰ Their discussions reveal a variety of sexual ideas and draw on a range of sexual discourses in a way that, despite often employing scientific rhetoric, is by no means limited to the boundaries of current scientific research or mainstream medical advice.

Among these ideas is that in which masturbation, and particularly ejaculation (though the forum does have a moderately active section for women), causes negative effects well beyond that of the physical exercise involved, extending from social anxiety, weight gain, and sexual impotence and desensitization, to the more drastic effects of underdevelopment, impaired cognitive ability, height loss, urinary incontinence, and insanity. In contrast to this, periods of continence can give rise to what the community calls 'superpowers': NoFap's homepage calls on users to 'seize control of your sexuality and turn it into superpowers today'. (While the majority of

¹⁰ NoFap survey of members April 2012: <https://www.nofap.com/about/community> [accessed 20 November 2016]. At the time of writing its website forum had 74,524 registered members, though the actual community, extending into discussion group webhost Redditt, must be significantly larger.

its services are free, NoFap does offer a paid service at \$50 a month or \$360 yearly.)¹¹ The main ‘superpowers’ that NoFap says its users report are socially-oriented, such as increased confidence, lessening of social anxiety, and increased sexual attention from others (NoFap is very careful to include all sexual orientations), some of which can be assigned to altered behaviours such as not sitting at home all day watching pornography, or other physical innovations such as improved diet or exercise, which are also recommended by NoFap. There are also, however, reports of an increase in what they call ‘creative mojo’. Many, they say, ‘claim to feel more creative after a reboot [period of abstinence]’:

Some take up new creative pursuits, or find they are better problem-solvers at work. Proponents of ‘sexual transmutation’ view this boost in creativity as the result of directing libidinous energy into constructive projects rather than wasting it on pornography.¹²

This manner of conceptualizing a positive transformation of something retained during sexual abstinence resembles the discourse of productive sexual continence explored by this thesis. The physiological underpinnings to NoFap’s official line are structured around the hormones, primarily dopamine, released by sexual gratification. Excessive quantities of these hormones can, the writers claim, prompt a rewards-based system of addiction, causing many of the above-mentioned physiological and emotional problems. But as shown by the above excerpt, its members also frequently draw on a model of sexual or libidinous energy, roughly Freudian, which they feel can be rechanneled through continence. A handful go further, explicitly using a rhetoric of seminal retention, in which the loss of semen is imagined as directly weakening, but which can, through retention, be reabsorbed into the body and give

¹¹ <https://www.nofapacademy.com> [accessed 6 January 2017].

¹² <https://www.nofap.com/rebooting/> [accessed 16 August 2016].

health and general wellbeing. The discourse of productive sexual continence has, it seems, continued to evolve and adapt to new 'styles of reasoning'.

This thesis has sought to identify and describe a discourse of productive sexual continence operative in late nineteenth-century Aesthetic writing, with a view to deepening understanding of the literary texts involved, and of the period in which they were written. It has argued that this aesthetic-ethical discourse was a manifestation of a much larger tradition of thinking about sexual continence as a state that led to an increase in creative, intellectual, or physical power, a tradition stretching from ancient Greek culture to the present day, and taking many different forms. It is my hope that, in the process, I have indicated the need for new ways of reading sexual continence both in history and in literary texts.

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