Journal of Victorian Culture, 2019, Vol. 24, No. 2, 179–192
doi: 10.1093/jvcult/vcy077
New Agenda

Impotence and the Male Artist: The Case of George Moore

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ABSTRACT

George Moore was infamous for his bragging about sexual exploits, and for his treatment of sexual themes in his novels, autobiographies, and poems. But at the end of his autobiography *Hail and Farewell* (1911–1914), he declared his intention to consciously embrace the onset of age-related sexual impotence. Further, he claimed that this half-voluntary, half-involuntary continence was going to be the final step towards his transformation into a great artist, and allow him to write a book – *Hail and Farewell* itself – that would be a great work of art. This article asks why Moore made this declaration at a time when impotence was being increasingly associated with degeneration, weakness, and effeminacy. It argues that Moore was drawing on a sexual discourse widely credited in the Victorian period, in which sexual continence involved the containment of something that could then be put actively towards other ends, including the production of artistic works. Moore's employment of this discourse is read alongside his gendering of artistic success, to show how he represented impotence – imagined as containment rather than as failure – not as effeminate and weak, but as masculine and strengthening.

KEYWORDS: sexuality, masculinity, mental health, identity, creativity, aestheticism

George Moore spent a large portion of his career writing joyously and explicitly about sex. As a young writer in London he created a Decadent artistic persona close to that of the narrator of his *Confessions of a Young Man* (1888), and wrote novels on such themes as adultery, alcoholism, single motherhood and inter-class marriage. Like that of fellow Irish author Oscar Wilde, Moore's literary career was carried out at dinner tables and in drawing rooms as much as in the study. He created what Elizabeth Grubgeld has called 'a self formulated for public consumption, to be understood and "read" just as one would read his written word', and developed this persona in tandem with periodically published autobiographies.[1] This posing included frequent bragging, on and off the page, about sexual affairs.

In his 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'.[2] And yet at the end of this same work Moore explicitly announced his intention to embrace his increasing sexual impotence – to hasten the onset of involuntary debility with voluntary celibacy. Richard Cave has read this episode as an introduction of

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1 Elizabeth Grubgeld, *George Moore and the Autogenous Self: The Autobiography and Fiction* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), p. 16.

2 George Moore, *Hail and Farewell*, ed. by Richard Cave (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1976; first published 1911–1914). All further references will be to this edition unless otherwise stated, and will be given in the text.

comedy into the otherwise touchingly serious episode of his leaving a partner, a kindly way of directing satire towards himself rather than the abandoned woman.[3] But Moore also represents his newly continent state as having two purposes. The first is the preservation of health: 'I must cease to be your lover unless my life is to be sacrificed', he claims (p. 602). And secondly, his altered sexuality leads into the revelation of his supposed destiny: to write his great book, *Hail and Farewell*. Having moved to Ireland 10 years before to join the Irish Literary Revival, he claimed that sexual continence would allow him to write 'a work of liberation . . . liberation from ritual and priests, a book of precept and example, a turning-point in Ireland's destiny' (p. 643). Impotence (whether involuntary or affected) was a position of mysterious power and authority for Moore: 'chastity is the prerogative of the prophet', he declares, 'why no man can tell' (p. 607). The tone is tongue-in-cheek, but Moore had a habit of taking his jokes seriously: if I seem to deal with Moore's delicate, complex tones with a too-heavy hand, it is only to accentuate the hitherto unrecognized seriousness in this particular jest. When he returned to England in 1911 – to escape scandal resulting from unflattering portraits of members of the Irish literary scene in *Hail and Farewell* – sexual debility became a keynote of his public persona. In 1913 Carl Von Vechten remembers Moore having, at a dinner party, 'referred to his impotency in the most careless manner possible', and W. B. Yeats reported Moore's saying to a lady, 'how I regret, for your sake, that I'm impotent'.[4]

What did Moore hope to gain from this public avowal of sexual dysfunction? Could he have been sincere in his claim that lack of sexual activity would have implications for both his physical and mental wellbeing and creative functioning, that it was essential to his literary career? And how was this change from hyper-potency to impotency gendered, by Moore and by others? Trev Broughton, in her study of Froude's revelations concerning Thomas Carlyle's impotence, has argued that the outrage inspired by Froude's exposé was the result of changing attitudes to male impotence itself. 'By 1903', she writes, '"impotence" had been definitively pathologized within an elaborate diagnostic framework', and signified not only functional or even moral disorder, but also 'a potentially dangerous and virtually unspeakable identity'. In line with the pathologization of more familiar non-reproductive sexualities such as homosexuality, male impotence 'came to connote not just individual pathology but racial decline; its symptoms were to be found among the stigmata of degeneracy'.[5] As Broughton points out, one of the major signs of degeneracy was nature's ultimate judgement, the withdrawal of reproductive potential. And as we see in the essays in this New Agenda, unusual exertion, including artistic exertion, left even middle-class men open to charges of degeneracy, as being itself a deviation from the norm. This new vulnerability consolidated difficulties that James Eli Adams and Andrew Dowling have shown facing male artists throughout the period, as they struggled to 'represent intellectual vocations as affirmations of masculine identity'.[6] Froude's account was penned in 1887 but published after Carlyle's death and just over a decade before Moore's disclosure. For Carlyle's posthumous character, the repercussions stretched beyond the implications for understanding his marriage to his standing as a public intellectual:

3 Richard Cave, 'George Moore's "Stella"', *Review of English Studies*, 28 (1977), 181–8 (p. 184).

4 Adrian Frazier, *George Moore: 1852–1933* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), pp. 387, 563 (n. 68).

5 Trev Broughton, '"Revelations on Ticklish Topics": Impotence, Biography and Froude-Carlyle' in *Men of Letters, Writing Lives: Masculinity and Literary Auto/Biography in the Late-Victorian Period* (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 136–65; pp. 164, 161, 154.

6 James Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), p. 2; Andrew Dowling, *Manliness and the Male Novelist in Victorian Literature* (London: Routledge, 2001).

'nothing less than Carlyle's reputation as man of letters is at stake'. In this 'torrid sexual-political climate', why did Moore risk not only declaring his supposed impotence publically, but also making it part of his identity as a literary figure?[7] If, as the introduction to this New Agenda suggests, the modern genius was 'continually in danger of teetering into the categories of pathology' – not to mention, for the male genius, effeminacy – why did Moore so deliberately and wilfully fling himself over this deadly brink?

In answer to these questions, one could point to Moore's penchant for provocation. Having found that the shocking potency that he had long cultivated had become less shocking as attitudes towards male sexuality changed, did he grasp instead for one of the few sexualities (within the law) that still had the power to shock: impotence? This hypothesis provides motive, but tells us little about the connections that Moore drew between his new sexual state and his mental powers. It also fails to account for his confidence that he could be impotent without appearing effeminate, a fate which Eli Adams argues was an inevitable hazard for male writers in a society in which 'the same gender system that underwrote male dominance also called into question the "manliness" of intellectual labour'.[8] Another possibility is that impotence had always been part of Moore's ever-contradictory explorations of masculinity, in the form of a Decadent embrace of futility and failure. Mark Llewellyn has said of Moore's early experiments in Baudelairean poetry that 'impotence, poetic and physical, is perhaps the keynote'. But this is the impotence of male speakers who are 'pathetic, passive, and lost figures', an example of what Dowling calls 'hegemonic deviance', the kind of impotence that, in its very lamentations, reinforces an ideal of potent masculinity, so very unlike the impotent/celibate artist-hero who ends *Hail and Farewell*.[9] What had changed?

Moore's announcement seems less strange when situated within his wider explorations of the male artist's sexuality, in which physical reserve leads not to effeminization, but to a mental potency equivalent to – and even better than – physical potency. Moore can be understood as engaging with a common, but now under-acknowledged nineteenth-century sexual health discourse in which excessive sexual activity was thought to be unhealthy to the point of risking death, and abstinence from sexual activity considered to increase physical and mental strength and well-being, especially (though not exclusively) for men. He was not the only writer to apply this theory to the male artist. He himself associates this sexuality with Balzac and Pater, among others, while Broughton has shown how Carlyle imagined something similar.[10] Herbert Sussman has explored how male artists in the first half of the Victorian period often conceptualized their artistry in terms of male sexual regulation, in which too much or too little sex were equally threatening to both masculinity and artistic potential. The figure of the celibate, Sussman argues, functioned for these writers and painters as a limit-case, a fantasy through which to idealize the reserved potency of extreme continence while also condemning the damage that its excess could cause. Only Pater in Sussman's analysis formulates a thoroughly positive ideal of abstinence, and he attributes this to Pater's non-normative position as a homosexual man.[11] It would be tempting to argue that Moore was likewise attempting to evolve a non-normative masculine sexuality.

7 Broughton, 'Revelations', pp. 161, 157.

8 Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, p. 1.

9 Mark Llewellyn, '"Pagan Moore": Poetry, Painting, and Passive Masculinity in George Moore's *Flowers of Passion* (1877) and *Pagan Poems* (1881)', *Victorian Poetry*, 45 (2007), 77–92 (p. 80). Dowling, *Manliness and the Male Novelist*, p. 3.

10 Broughton, 'Revelations', pp. 139–41.

11 Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 174.

Moore is certainly being deliberately provocative at the end of *Hail and Farewell*, particularly in his use of celibacy to make barbed attacks on Irish Catholicism. He widely criticized the Church's influence in Irish society and politics, and had recently publically renounced his family's Catholicism in an Irish newspaper. But he also draws on a sexual discourse that was less subversive in late Victorian Britain than Sussman allows, though it was occasionally used for subversive ends. Even before *Hail and Farewell*, and particularly in an 1892 article entitled 'Sex in Art', Moore makes use of this discourse, among others, in his attempts to construct a sexually potent, but not necessarily sexually active artistry that was both healthy and thoroughly masculine, and was necessary for the creation of what he called 'great' art. For the 'great' artist, to have loved – and performed – in the past was important, though not uniformly necessary. More important was intellectual cultivation, in the course of which sex could be fostered and intensified in the mind instead of the body. If his early poetry had thrived on 'the themes of memory and sterility, the active past and the impotent present', his later engagements with sexual reminiscence saw the artist's impotence as productive of mental masculine potency even beyond physical sexual experience.[12] This essay explores Moore's construction of potent continence in 'Sex in Art', before returning to the impotency episode at the end of *Hail and Farewell*. The final section asks how a younger literary generation responded to Moore's changed sexual persona.

1. 'SEX IN ART': GENDER AND THE GREAT ARTIST

George Moore, like many of his contemporaries, made little distinction between gender – what makes one masculine or feminine – and sex, or the instinct to copulate. He shunned the former word, and in using the latter had a tendency to slip between both senses, in a manner that assumes an intimate connection between the two. This interdependence is borne out in his short story 'Albert Nobbs', one of Moore's many stories about 'celibate' people, wherein a woman spends her life masquerading as a man in order to get employment as a waiter. Though Albert remembers being in love with a man as a young girl, being an 'outcast from both sexes' – a 'perhapser' – seems to cause a loss of sexual instinct. Both comedy and pity are drawn from his/her efforts to find companionship in marriage to a woman without understanding the probable expectations of any partner.[13]

This conflation of sexuality and gender shapes Moore's representation of the male artist's sexuality in the essay 'Sex in Art'. The essay deals with the inability of women to create 'great' art. Women, he says, 'have succeeded as queens, courtesans, and actresses, but in the higher arts, in painting, in music, and literature, their achievements are slight indeed' (p. 220).[14] His arguments are various: women are essentially unintellectual, superficial and uncreative, and should limit themselves to the imitation of male achievements within the narrower sphere of feminine understanding and experience. 'How impossible it is', he says, 'for women to do more than to accept the themes invented by men, and to decorate and arrange them according to their pretty feminine fancies' (p. 224). Most importantly women's art, in Moore's opinion, lacks what he calls 'sex'. 'Sex is as important an element in a work of art as it is in life', he writes, 'all art that lives is full of sex'. But what does he mean by sex? 'George Eliot', he complains, 'is

[12] Llewellyn, '"Pagan Moore"', p. 82.

[13] George Moore, 'Albert Nobbs' in *Celibate Lives* (London: William Heinemann, 1937; story first published 1927), p. 59.

[14] George Moore, 'Sex in Art', in *Modern Painting* (London: Walter Scott, 1893), pp. 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), pp. 737–8, and 'Sex in Art, II', *The Speaker*, 5 (25 June 1892), pp. 766–78.

one in whom sex seems to have hesitated', while Jane Austen limited herself to a feminine art, and so 'her books live, while those of her ponderous rival are being very rapidly forgotten' (p. 221). But he does not wish us to think that he means by 'sex' the romantic relations that Austen's novels take as their subject. He specifies that 'there is very little sex in George Sand's works, and they, too, have gone the way of sexless things' (p. 221). 'When I say that all art that lives is full of sex', he continues, 'I do not mean that the artist must have led a profligate life; I mean, indeed, the very opposite. George Sand's life was notoriously profligate, and her books tell the tale' (pp. 221–2).

Here the essay takes a strange diversion. If by 'sex' Moore doesn't mean purely sexual acts or even the culture of romance surrounding them, neither does he entirely mean what we would now call gender. Having already moved deftly from the content of art to its creator, he writes, 'I mean by sex that concentrated essence of life which the great artist jealously reserved for his art, and through which it pulsates' (p. 222). This necessary reservation of 'sex' does not mean that the great artist should not be sexually active at all, though it does seem that some restriction of sexual activity may be necessary: 'the great artist and Don Juan are irreparably antagonistic; one cannot contain the other' (p. 222). But although Moore does not now seem explicitly to be talking in terms of gender, his shift to masculine pronouns is essential to his thinking. As well as emphasizing the gendered nature of 'great' rather than indifferent art, the change also highlights the similarity of this sexual restraint to an ancient manner of conceptualizing male sexuality, far from obsolete in the nineteenth century, in which the containment of semen was prized for its invigorating properties, and even thought to be necessary for health. More than anything else that Moore says, this similarity would likely have indicated to many nineteenth-century readers an argument for limiting the category of 'great artist' to men.

In ancient Greek medicine, semen was widely considered to be a distillation of the blood, which was itself considered to contain 'breath' (the Galenic *pneuma* or *spiritus*), the substance necessary to all life. Its loss outside the need for reproduction was therefore thought to be potentially harmful. This is not to say that the majority of Greek men necessarily heeded the warning: indeed, other elements of Greek medicine counselled the need for regular sexual activity.[15] But those who were famous for extreme feats of physical or intellectual labour – athletes and philosophers – often also came to be known for their impressive sexual abstinence, to which their success was attributed. Similar ideas can be found in many ancient and modern cultures around the world, though the physiology differs dramatically. As Western medicine began to formalize in the eighteenth century, many emerging systems integrated the importance of contained semen to male health, though they rationalized this importance in widely different ways. Friedrich Hoffman, John Brown, and Théophile de Bordeu all developed systems of medicine in which semen played a crucial role though, as Thomas Laqueur puts it, what was 'understood by semen in these general contexts is difficult to pinpoint'.[16] Nevertheless a common view emerged that 'if everything was in good order, semen, like blood, circulated and nourished the body's most critical elements first, especially the nerves and the spinal fluid, with which it was intimately connected'.[17] This

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

[16] Thomas Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2003), p. 462, n. 18. See also Vern Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1994), pp. 19–21.

[17] Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, p. 196.

connection between nerves and semen reflected a long-standing relationship between sex and the brain. But these ideas co-existed with the equally widespread belief that sexual activity was necessary to the health of both genders.[18] Rationally dissonant sexual discourses have always prospered 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.[19]

The nineteenth century inherited this coalition of sexual models. And while other areas of medicine moved towards consensus as the discipline professionalized, the somewhat niche area of sexual health, while much discussed, continued as what Lesley Hall and Roy Porter have called 'the Victorian polyphony' until relatively late in the century.[20] James Richard Smyth, writing in the *Lancet* in 1841, was already old-fashioned when he claimed that 'it is the presence of the semen in the circulating fluids of the male . . . which gives to the countenances of the continent and chaste the peculiar expression of energy and vigorous health which generally characterise them'.[21] Few medical professionals at any level would have given full credence by the 1840s to the literal absorption of semen into the blood, though Baden-Powell's 1922 assertion in his scouting manual *Rovering to Success* that retained semen 'gives the vigour of manhood to his frame, and it builds up his nerves and courage' suggests that such literalism survived (and indeed still does survive) outside the profession.[22] Yet newer sexual systems were generally formed around the idea that sex involved the loss of something, whether semen, energy, or some spiritual quality, and often – by extension – that sexual abstinence, whether permanent or temporary, was strengthening.

This view persisted alongside equally long-standing popular and professional concerns that continence was dangerous to health. Potential damage could include atrophy of the sexual organs through disuse, or the general weakening of these organs that produced the dreaded condition spermatorrhoea, in which semen leaked from a man involuntarily and constantly, and led to prostration and even in some cases death.[23] Excessive sexual activity was widely thought to cause the same condition. Doctors throughout the century took up positions at any point on a spectrum from recommending no sexual activity outside of reproductive acts, to advising that men not in a position to marry seek out extra-marital relationships as a matter of life and death. John Addington Symonds remembers in his *Memoirs* how, suffering from 'seminal losses' as a young man in the 1860s, he consulted Sir Spencer Wells, surgeon to Queen Victoria, who (much to Symonds's repugnance) 'recommended cohabitation with a hired mistress, or, what was better, matrimony'.[24] On the other hand, an editorial on sexual

18 Michael Mason, *The Making of Victorian Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 217.

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

20 Lesley Hall and Roy Porter, *The Facts of Life: The Creation of Sexual Knowledge in Britain, 1659–1905* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 132.

21 James Richard Smyth, 'Miscellaneous Contributions to Pathology and Therapeutics: Impotence and Sterility', *Lancet*, 36 (1841), 779–85 (p. 784).

22 Lord (Robert) Baden-Powell, *Rovering to Success: A Book of Life-Sport for Young Men*, 2nd edn revised (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1930; first published 1922), p. 104. See also Mason, *Victorian Sexuality*, p. 226.

23 For more about the history of 'spermatorrhoea' and its relation with the medical establishment, see Mason, *Victorian Sexuality*, pp. 295–8; Elizabeth Stephens, 'Coining Spermatorrhoea: Medicine and Male Body Fluids, 1836–1866', *Sexualities*, 12 (2009), 467–85; Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, 'Body Doubles: The Spermatorrhea Panic', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 12 (2003), 365–99.

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

health in the *Lancet* in 1892, asking 'what are the physiological facts that ought to be proclaimed by the medical profession', asserts that 'sexual continence does not beget impotence' (its begetting any other ill-effects is by this time not even considered). As for the difficulty of continence, this same editorial claims that because 'no function of the body is so influenced and controlled by the higher nerve centres as the sexual', so desire can be stimulated or combated by exposing oneself to or avoiding 'lewd imaginings, loose talk and sensuous scenes'. 'Vice', it reminds us, 'is voluntary, and it is only by the exercise of resolute self-will that virtue is maintained'.[25] William Acton had made very similar comments in the 1850s. It is through this discourse of will and self-control that continence was incorporated into nineteenth-century masculinity, in what Broughton has called, with reference to Carlyle, 'muscular celibacy' (though it did not always entail the life-long total abstinence from sexual activity that the word 'celibacy' suggests).

Ben Barker-Benfield has famously dubbed this approach to male sexuality 'the spermatic economy', due to the frequent employment of economic metaphors of waste, reserve, and husbanding of resources to conceptualize its importance.[26] But the phrase is of limited usefulness in describing Victorian male sexuality as a whole, as it implies a too exclusive importance of semen itself, and a too uniformly literal rooting of sexual ideas in an economic model. The conglomeration of physiological models in a single text that is typical of writing on sexual health throughout the century can be seen in Acton's *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs* (1857). The representativeness of Acton's pronouncements on female sexuality has often been called into question, though Lesley Hall and Ivan Crozier have recently shown that his opinions are representative with respect to male sexuality.[27] Acton dismisses what he sees as a still popular belief that ejaculation involves 'the actual passage of brain down the spinal cord', asserting his own professional status while also reminding his readers of the perennial association of sex with the nervous system. He then admits that 'it is 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'.[28] Yet he also refers to 'the importance of the fluid semen, which young men would thus lavishly expend'.[29] Generally Acton adheres to a thermodynamic rather than strictly economic model of limited bodily energy, in which 'the expenditure of vital force in one direction diverts it from others'.[30] This model, like economic metaphors, does not explain why he feels that sex absorbs more of this energy than other activities. But it does allow him

[25] Anonymous, 'Sexual Physiology', *Lancet* (5 November 1892), p. 1055.

[26] Ben Barker-Benfield, 'The Spermatic Economy: A Nineteenth Century View of Sexuality', *Feminist Studies*, 1 (1972), 45–74.

[27] See Lesley Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900–1950* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 16, and Ivan Crozier, 'William Acton and the History of Sexuality: The Medical and Professional Context', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 5 (2000), 1–27.

[28] 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 edn revised (London: John Churchill, 1858; first published 1857), p. 44.

[29] Acton, *Functions and Disorders*, p. 15.

[30] See Anson Rabinbach, *The Human Motor: Energy, Fatigue, and the Origins of Modernity* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1990), pp. 64–8.

to privilege continence as health-giving in the same way as a more literally semen-based model.[31]

Acton also points to the damage done to the nervous system by orgasm. '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 forms of disease to which we have hitherto failed in discovering a key'.[32] Though Acton portrays himself as standing at the frontier of science, ancient Greek writers had made similar statements about the shock of orgasm.[33] Later in the century the new condition of neurasthenia – in which sufferers were thought both to have 'exhausted' their nerve endings and to have drawn on essential reserves of 'nervous energy' that weakened the body – had a distinct sexual category called 'sexual neurasthenia'.[34] This traditional relationship between sex and the brain stands behind the common extension of the strengthening potential of continence from physical to mental activity, an extension of which Sigmund Freud's theory of sublimation is perhaps the most famous example.

Moore's expressions of the importance of 'sex' in art take advantage of the vagueness of physiology in even the most physiologically based Victorian writing on sexual health. His 'concentrated essence of life' is directly reminiscent of the 'haematic theory' of ancient Greek medicine, by no means absent from popular sexual understanding in the nineteenth century, even if rejected by most doctors.[35] The word 'reserves' and the phrase 'through which it pulsates' could not fail to remind readers of the kind of literal absorption-and-circulation theory expressed by Smyth and rejected – but acknowledged to have popular capital – by Acton. Moore is careful, however, to make no physiological commitments. After all, if 'sex' should be understood literally as semen, how does it make its way into 'art'? Some version of Acton's system of energy management could help here. Energy too could be understood as a 'concentrated essence of life', and art as a mental function so reliant on such energy that art and sex become mutually exclusive activities. This interpretation, while no doubt also courted by Moore, becomes less possible as an exclusive model as the passage progresses. 'Profligate, I am afraid, history proves the artist sometimes to have been', he admits, 'but his profligacy is only ephemeral and circumstantial; what is abiding in him is chastity of mind, though not always of body' (p. 222). Here Moore moves away from the physiology of semen to an idea that evidently owes much to that physiology's logic, but shifts the discussion firmly into a mental realm. Moore wrote at a time when physiological ways of understanding sexual function were giving way to nervous or mental ones: what Arnold I. Davidson calls the movement from 'anatomical' to 'psychiatric' models.[36] Even while seeming to understand 'sex' as a mental function, Moore ties his reasoning tightly into anatomical sexual models. This does not, of course, mean that Moore necessarily gave direct credence to any of the models that he thus conjures before his readers' minds. His combination of anatomical and psychiatric understandings of

31 Acton, *Functions and Disorders*, p. 8.

32 Acton, *Functions and Disorders*, p. 35.

33 Rouselle, *Porneia*, p. 14.

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

35 Mason, *Victorian Sexuality*, p. 209.

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

sex plays a key rhetorical role in 'Sex and Art'. Without it, his arguments against the ability of women to produce great art would have had far less emotional clout. His reference to 'the fluid nervous tenderness and graces of the female temperament' (p. 227) is reminiscent of the weak, involuntary output of the male sufferer from spermatorrhoea, whose incontinent dribblings, while prolific, were almost certain to be sterile.

Moore's explicit, but somewhat unusual rationale for the impossibility of great female art is otherwise difficult for a casual reader to untangle. Having stated that 'it is certain that woman occupies but a small place in the life of an artist', he continues 'it is just because man can raise himself above the sentimental cravings of natural affection that his art is so infinitely higher than woman's art' (p. 222). With seeming irony, it is precisely because women are so sexual – because they are creatures of the hearth and the bedroom – that they cannot channel that sexuality into their art: or, if they do, it remains qualitatively the wrong sort of sex, inherently poor stuff. Moore is dragging into his service here another common misogynistic discourse, in which women are thought to represent the personal, the sexual, the specific, while men can look beyond the narrow family home to the general life of the world, or indeed can happily sacrifice domesticity altogether. But this uneasy alliance of discourses is then given a decidedly idiosyncratic twist. In a complex set of associated values, Moore connects women's fatal tendency for 'natural affections' to an *inability* to 'tell the truth about themselves', though he does not mean by this a lack of straightforward confession. 'In their novels', he says, 'they are too subject to their own natures to attain the perfect and complete realization of self, which the so-called impersonal method alone affords' (p. 226). In other words, they are too narrowly sensual to really cultivate self. Moore's thinking about the personal and impersonal was undergoing a transition at this time, as his former individualism gave way to veneration of the universal, of what was timeless and lasting above the superficial and temporary, especially in art. The original version of 'Sex in Art' as published in *The Speaker* read, 'I mean by sex that concentrated essence of life which the great artist jealously reserves for his art, and through which it pulsates *to the end of time*' (my italics).[37] Great art, in this respect, is art that lasts. But the 'impersonal method' is only 'so-called' because Moore tended to call this desirable quality the 'personal' or 'self', despite the generic association of these terms with precisely the opposite of what he usually meant. 'Self' had come to mean for him those qualities of temperament that one was born with, rather than what one artificially acquired during one's lifetime. Women were doubly damned in this respect: if they did achieve 'realization of self', they had to realise their femininity, which could only produce minor art.

The appearance of several paragraphs about masculine artistry in an essay otherwise about art by women suggests that, like so much writing about women by men, its main purpose was to construct and defend the masculinity of the male artist. It evidently draws on what Eli Adams has identified as the Victorian tradition for male intellectual labour to 'lay claim to the capacity for self-discipline as a distinctly masculine attribute and . . . embody masculinity as a virtuoso asceticism', even if Moore makes the great artist some allowances as far as actual asceticism went.[38] Similar statements about male sexual physiology in relation to 'great' art are found in *Hail and Farewell*, a book that explicitly took masculinity as one of its subjects. In a letter to Edouard Dujardin in 1907 he said of *Hail and Farewell*, which he was then composing, that 'it is taking the form of a novel with no women in it. I have for so long concerned

[37] George Moore, 'Sex in Art', *The Speaker*, 5 (18 June 1892), 737–8 (p. 737).

[38] Eli Adams, *Dandies and Desert Saints*, p. 2.

myself with the eternal feminine that I contemplate with pleasure (in literature) the eternal masculine'.[39] Moore's declaration of impotence at the end of this three-volume autobiography, seemingly so contradictory of almost all that had gone before, engages with similar ideas as 'Sex in Art' does, concerning personality and impersonality. And again he weaves together many different sexual discourses, from which there emerges one final message: that not having sex will make him a great artist.

2. HAIL AND FAREWELL

Hail and Farewell is, in simple terms, an autobiographical account of the time that Moore spent living in Ireland between 1900 and 1910. It is also an account of the Irish Literary Renaissance, and of his relationships with key figures such as his cousin Edward Martyn and W. B. Yeats; an attempt (so he said) to free Ireland from the moral grip of the Catholic church; and, as Richard Cave puts it, Moore's way of 'shedding his old reputation and transforming himself for a new role', his 'translation from a jester to a prophet'.[40] This process involved the declaration of his sexual impotence in similarly physiological (and non-committal) terms to 'Sex in Art', though with more emphasis on the implications for general physical and mental health, as well as the connection of this sexual change to his theory of the 'personal' in life and in art. This manner of describing impotence drew on ideas that were very likely common among Moore's generation, within which they potentially posed little threat to masculinity. Indeed, they could be portrayed, as they were by Moore, as conducive to the successful performance of certain masculine roles. Though this was by no means the only way of representing impotence in the nineteenth century, it would certainly have been plausible.

Moore begins with his decision to end a relationship when he realizes that his female lover's sexual appetite is larger than his own. On perceiving this discrepancy, he toys with the idea that their age difference is to blame: 'she was twenty years younger than I was, and at forty-six or thereabouts one begins to feel one's time for love is over; one is consultant rather than practitioner' (p. 601). Broaching the subject of impotence in medicalized terms, but as part of normal physiology rather than pathology, allows Moore to represent it as an inevitable dimension of masculine experience, rather than as the affliction of a diseased few (the movement from practitioner to consultant is notably a promotion in rank). But the involuntary nature of such universal impotence does not entirely fit his purposes. The importance to Moore of the act of cultivating one's personal temperament drives him also to represent the change as the natural result of such cultivation, as an embrace of what is essential in himself. 'If these twenty years were removed' he asks, 'would things be different? It seemed to me that the difficulty that had arisen would have been the same earlier in my life as it was now' (p. 601). After this, Moore shuttles between representing the change as natural and inevitable for all men, and as a deliberate, manly adaptation to necessity. Of married people he says, 'they have to come to terms with love, especially the man, for whom it is a question of life and death' (p. 601). 'Men have died of love', he writes, 'though Shakespeare says they haven't. Manet and Daudet – both died of love' (p. 602). Manet and Daudet both famously died of complications associated with syphilis, but that seems far from Moore's purpose here; what matters more is that they were artists. Casual comments often introduce major themes in

[39] Letter from George Moore to Edouard Dujardin, 25 April 1907, in *Letters from George Moore to Edouard Dujardin, 1886–1922*, ed. by John Eglinton (New York, NY: C. Gaige, 1929), pp. 61–2.

[40] Richard Cave, 'Introduction', in George Moore, *Hail and Farewell*, ed. by Richard Cave (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smyth, 1976), pp. 11–46 (p. 11).

Hail and Farewell. Further on, amid evidently symbolic descriptions of autumn landscapes and the rhythms of nature, he writes that 'no man lives who can say he is not interested in the question when a man should begin to try – how shall I put it? to avoid unplatonic love encounters' (p. 607).

Something that is necessarily and biologically part of every man's life is unlikely to be understood as effeminate. But just in case, Moore has the final blow to his sexuality come as a joint decision between his body and his mind (representing, respectively, necessity and will). Before finally ending his relationship with 'Stella' he represents himself as inconsequent, indecisive and weak, full of 'shame'. But this state comes not from the sexual change in itself, but from his reluctance to face her honestly. It is a keynote of Moore's autobiographical artistry to deflect undesirable interpretations by anticipation and displacement. When he does confront her, the reassertion of control and directness of speech signify an ironic return to, rather than turning from, decisive masculinity. 'One evening', he writes, 'I nipped the quarrel that was beginning, stopping suddenly at the end of the avenue. It is better that we should understand each other. The plain truth is that I must cease to be your lover unless my life is to be sacrificed' (p. 602). Though this danger of death may seem extreme, it is within the risks predicted for excessive sexuality by mainstream Victorian medicine. Having left her, he continues having occasional 'love encounters' for several years though with dwindling enthusiasm. Finally, 'a lady called to see my pictures, and . . . the encounter 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' (p. 607). Even at this point of reluctant acceptance of necessity, we are reminded of the association between sex and the brain that had lain behind his arguments in 'Sex in Art'. If excessive sex draws directly from the brain, we may ask ourselves, what may the brain do without that drain on its powers?

For Moore, this movement towards an impotence that is partly a self-disciplined continence is not a renunciation of sex wholesale. 'Love', he says, 'is for the young and 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' (p. 606). But 'the love of the senses' is not, Moore would have us believe, the only love. If, physically, 'very little remains after fifty for a man', nevertheless 'our interest in sex . . . remains the same, but it is an intellectual interest, changed, transformed, lifted out of the flesh'. As in 'Sex in Art', this change from the potentially nebulous 'love' to the more physically determined 'sex' also indicates a more exclusive gendering: he continues, '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; but we do not kiss the point of white shoulders' (pp. 607–8). This is not only a different, but a more intense and satisfying sexual experience, as he writes that 'we are further from our mistresses when they throw their arms about us than we are when we sit by the fire, elderly men, dreaming of the kisses given and the words said in distant years' (p. 606). Moore is drawing on and adapting here the confused and often contradictory discourses that Katherine Snyder identifies as surrounding nineteenth-century bachelors, in which aesthetic reverie was privileged over experience. Snyder shows how Henry James used the artist-bachelor as 'a threshold figure who marks by crossing the boundaries of familial and sexual normativity'. Moore can be thought of as similarly using the impotent artist not to dismantle normative masculinity, but rather to indicate an exception that proves the rule.[41]

[41] Katherine V. Snyder, *Bachelors, Manhood and the Novel, 1850–1925* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 172.

No sooner has the Moore of *Hail and Farewell* finally accepted his impotence than he realizes its appropriateness for the dual project that he had been working at to little effect for some years: prevailing upon Ireland to cultivate the Irish temperament (a complicated ambition that included revival of the Irish language, the development of Irish art, and the freeing of the Irish moral conscience from religion and specifically Catholicism), and setting an example by writing a great work of Irish literature (though not, it should be said, in Irish, an omission he put down to his age and consequent inability to learn new languages). And as usual with Moore, the essential fitness of a continent sexuality for this task is not so much argued for as represented from many angles. His first attempt is satirical, 'celibacy is set above all other virtues in Ireland, and the Irish people will listen to my exhortations now that I have become the equal of the priest, the nun, and the ox'. But he very quickly seems to be taking the idea seriously: 'chastity is the prerogative of the prophet, why no man can tell' (p. 608). He then imagines himself as literary prophet for Ireland. 'As soon as my change of life becomes known the women of Ireland will come to me crying, Master, speak to us, for, at the bidding of our magicians, we have borne children long enough. May we escape from the burden of child-bearing without sin?' (p. 608). He refers here to the Catholic Church's antipathy towards contraception ('magicians' being priests), a law that he saw as a direct denial that sexual activity could be an end in itself. Sexual freedom is evidently part of what he has in mind for Ireland: but then all of Ireland is not attempting to be a great artist. 'I have come', he imagines himself crying, 'into the most impersonal country in the world to preach personality – personal love and personal religion, personal art' (p. 608). But as we have seen, the 'personal' for Moore has more to do with temperament than choice, its freedom stretching to the liberty to cultivate your own temperament, but not liberty from this native soil. For the great artist, as he suggested in 'Sex in Art', this cultivation of personality will involve a certain keeping of oneself from others that will include the retention of something usually lost during sexual relationships, whether semen or something more ethereal. It is typical of Moore that he leaves the detail of this process to work itself out.

As the book ends, he seems to forget his resolutions to embrace impotence, and moves more firmly towards voluntary continence. He speculates on the possibility of taking a wife to amuse him in the evenings, who will bear him a son. He imagines moving his family into a house in France, the Clos St George, which he is told is a former residence of Rabelais: a fantasy that represents sex, domesticity and his old 'jester' persona all together. 'My life will have to end somewhere' he says, 'why not in the Clos St George?' But the answer is ready for him: 'because *Hail and Farewell* must be finished' (p. 643). '*Hail and Farewell* could not be abandoned for a vineyard' he continues – the vineyard standing in for all non-artistic fruitfulness – because it is a sacred book, a book of universal rather than selfish purpose. He casts himself as the saint who sacrifices his own needs and desires for the greater good: 'A sacrifice was demanded of me, by whom I knew not, nor for what purpose, but I felt I must leave my native land and my friends for the sake of a book' (p. 643). In 'Sex in Art', woman is said to be a bad artist because 'she will make no sacrifice for her art'. This giving up of family, friends, and country for art acts for Moore as an equivalent to the giving up of sexual activity for the greater intellectual and creative benefits that such abstinence can bring. Far from being effeminate or degenerate, Moore's impotent artist is a saint, a prophet, and a hero.

3. AFTERWORD: EBURY STREET

Between the lines of Moore's grandiose claims to be Ireland's saviour, we see him gradually shaping himself as a credible artist. His book, if not perhaps a 'sacred book', will plausibly be good because it issued from sexual sacrifice in reference to a discourse of artistic production that he expected his readers to recognize. This episode signals the final development of Moore's persona, adopted after the publication of *Hail and Farewell*, in which the worldly sensualist became a disinterested prophet, a medium for what is universal or eternal in humanity. A potent impotence – or a strange combination of impotence and continence – was crucial to this eminently masculine persona.

But was it persuasive? If it was possible still in 1911 for Moore to represent impotence in an essentially outdated manner, was it possible still for readers to take him at his word? The answer seems to have been yes and no. The younger literary élite did not ignore him. 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 in Ebury Street in London often characterized him as cold and inhuman, in a way suggestive of what Broughton calls 'the pathologization of sexual identities'.[42] Ford Madox Ford 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. He complains 'you felt mentally distressed at merely remembering the writings of George 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'.[43] Charles Morgan 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 a great artist, somehow destroyed his humanity. '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.[44]

Despite his avowedly promiscuous early life, he is represented as having monstrously rebirthed himself and died of the effort.

Osbert Burdett, in a 1915 poem called 'The Choice', attributed this cold inhumanity directly to Moore's sexuality. The choice in question is between two types of masculine artistry, represented by George Borrow and George Moore. The first offers 'green lanes or cornfields, / The steaming, hot sex of the earth'; the latter 'The life in the Temple, the lonely / The bookish, the bachelor hours'. It is hardly a choice between equal options: only in the first, Burdett writes, do 'men gladden like flowers'.[45] For the new literary generation, neither

[42] Virginia Woolf, 'A Born Writer', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 967 (29 July 1920), p. 485. Broughton, 'Revelations', p. 151.

[43] Quoted in Charles Morgan, *Epitaph on George Moore* (London: Macmillan, 1935), pp. 17, 18.

[44] Morgan, *Epitaph*, p. 14.

[45] Osbert Burdett, 'The Choice', in *Songs of Exuberance, Together with The Trenches* (London: A. C. Fifield, 1915), pp. 137–8 (ll. 9–10, 5–6, 8).

impotence nor sexual continence so readily signalled masculine discipline and production as it had for their parents and grandparents. They did not, it seems, read Moore's impotence as evidence that he was a great artist, for whom sex was 'that concentrated essence of life' which he 'jealously reserves for his art, and through which it pulsates'. Instead, they pathologized his wilful failure of sexual potency as failure in both life and art.

FUNDING

The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Research Council under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP/2007-2013) under Grant Agreement Number 340121. It is also a development of research funded by an AHRC postgraduate studentship award.