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## ***Teleny and the question of fin-de-siècle sexuality***

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The paper discusses the ways in which sexuality was represented in the 1890s, the period in which the Victorian moral taboos were gradually broken and sexuality as a literary theme left the close bounds of scientific discourse or pornography. The long anonymous work *My Secret Life*, published probably in the late 1880s, is still based upon the typical Victorian model of sexual behaviour (heterosexual coital intercourse) and its formal representation (confession); in contrast with that, the texts influenced by French decadence lay a great stress on alternative sexual behaviours (mainly homosexual). The anonymous novel *Teleny* then provides a considerable extension of the common misogynous stereotype by several more types.

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In his *Histoire de la sexualité*, Michel Foucault points out repeatedly that during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, instead of being suppressed and silenced as a public issue, sex was rather transformed and channelled into multiple “disseminating” discourses, which were actually used as mechanisms of power, and that these discourses affected many spheres of life, in such forms as religious confession in the early stages or medical (scientific) examination in the later. Sexuality, as a term of late nineteenth-century psychoanalysis or “scientia sexualis”, thus seems to be a construction of purely cognitive character – should the positivist Victorian age allow sex to be spoken of, then what must be said of it first is the “truth” of sex, which in other words means taxonomic demarcation of its manifestations. A pivotal publication of this type may be William Acton’s *The Function and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs, in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life, Considered in their Physiological, Social and Moral Relations* (1857),<sup>1</sup> with its clear identification of the three areas in which sexuality should be discussed – physiological (medical discourse), social (sociological discourse) and moral (ethical discourse). Significantly, no religious context is stressed in the title (the imperatives of the Holy Scripture and other religious texts are no more relevant for modern science) and neither is there any suggestion of emotional aspects of sexual behaviour; on the

other hand, what is offered instead of the sphere of delight, is the Malthusian question of reproduction (and population) – a crucial question indeed for the Victorian world.

In fiction, or at least in officially published fiction, any direct representation of sex was of course taboo before 1890. Had a novel broken this rule, it would have faced the danger of being excluded from Mudie's Select Library, the most prestigious and influential circulating library of the times, and this would drastically have diminished the book's market potential. Now it is not the aim of this paper to show how sex was portrayed indirectly in the Victorian novel nor is it my intention to discuss unofficial publications and their practices in this matter. I would like to mention just one title that may be taken as presenting a pre-*fin-de-siècle* model of 19<sup>th</sup>-century sexuality: it is an anonymous book called *My Secret Life*, and though its eleven volumes were indeed not issued by any official London publishing house, there seems to be a good reason for its inclusion. Foucault mentions the book as an almost single example of a Victorian text dealing openly with sexuality and it was also given a prominent place in the seminal theoretical treatment of the topic – Professor Steven Marcus' *The Other Victorians* – where two full chapters (more than 120 pages) are devoted to the discussion of this single publication. Moreover, it is perhaps the only Victorian book of this character that received any real critical attention and whose republication in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was motivated by scholarly interests mostly. There are of course many uncertainties concerning this unconventional work: we do not know who the author was, the only identity given being his (assumed) first name Walter; we cannot say when exactly the 4200-odd pages of his only literary production were written; and it is not even clear when the individual volumes were published for the first time. Some sources give the year of publication as 1888 (cf Marcus 1969: 78-83) but this date can only be accepted very tentatively. The title page of each volume bears no other imprint than that identifying the place of publication as Amsterdam. What is known for sure is the fact that the number of copies was very limited; traditionally it was believed there were just six, though now it seems there were slightly more, perhaps twenty five. Nevertheless, *My Secret Life* was a very limited edition, though not an exquisite one – it was printed rather poorly and was full of various printing errors.

*My Secret Life* is a detailed account of the author's sexual feats during many years of his life, a life systematically oriented towards a single activity – sex. It is however not true that the book “describes every known form of sexual perversion, from lesbianism, pederasty and flagellomania to sodomy, incest and bestiality” (Marcus 1969: 78), as one of the early commentators, Ralph Ginzburg, claimed, without evidently having read the book. No wonder Marcus calls Ginzburg's *Unhurried View of Erotica* a work of immaculate ignorance. Its author seems to be quite unreflectively influenced by the vocabulary of those Victorian and post-Victorian critics who turned away in awe from the “naughty-nineties” writers, for whom “perversion” was a focal point in their treatment of human sexual life. This was, however, by no means “Walter's” case. Even though during those long years of uninhibited sexual life he indeed experimented with various forms of sexual behaviour, the central and prevailing form was always that of heterogenic coital sex. And although any kind of emotional involvement was rather exceptional with him, we cannot even say that he took women simply as sexual objects.

Drs. Eberhard and Phyllis Kronhausen, American sexologists and editors of a two-volume selection from *My Secret Life* (1967), comment upon “Walter's” relationship to women in the way that is actually very polemical with Marcus' own critical attitude to “Walter's” deeds:

“We shall see [...] how remarkably positive Walter, by and large, felt towards women, how little hostility he ever showed them, and of how much enthusiasm he was capable regarding even those aspects of feminine sex anatomy which are generally the least

appreciated. More precisely, he was able to see as much beauty and poetry in a woman's sex organs as others may see in a work of art. For that alone he deserves, we feel, considerable credit in a world so often tainted by misogyny and disparagement of what men have been pleased to call the weaker sex." (Eberhard and Kronhausen 1967: xv)

Accepting these appreciative words, we may conclude that "Walter" is in many respects in accord with Victorian ideas of sexuality, rather than the other way around. Of course, he differs in the essential formal demands – his sex is neither marital nor temperate; on the contrary, it is blatantly extramarital, or promiscuous, in modern terms, and it is blatantly excessive. Compared to Acton's advice of sexual temperance, if not abstinence, even in married life, "Walter" indeed seems to be a rebel against the Victorian sexual code. But there are other aspects of his sexual behaviour that seem to confirm what may be called the mainstream model of Victorian sexual behaviour: the heterosexual coital intercourse may symbolically stand for the productive purpose of sexuality. "Walter's" attitude towards his sexual partners bears clear marks of the acts of altruism (he not only presented them with some money, but also used to buy small gifts for them, which might be helpful especially for the working-class girls), and he took these acquaintances as real sexual partners, always careful to please them too, or at least to enrich their own sexual experience. But above all, his presentation of his rich sexual experience completes the typical Victorian discourse of sex: his account is much more a clinical record of sexual behaviour than a pornographic fantasia; "Walter" is very careful not to distort the truth and to present each event with a matter-of-fact approach of a scientist. This is also why his work is so appreciated in our times – he recorded his experiences shortly after their consummation in order to give all details with as great precision and authenticity as possible. And indeed, we discover that he consistently uses some terminology, though of course a substandard one, and therefore his text has a considerable socio-linguistic merit too (*pego, quim*, etc.). Thus he can be viewed not only as one of the most uninhibited Victorian libertines but also as one of the typical Victorian amateur-scientists, although his field was rather delicate.

What distinguishes the *fin-de-siècle* conceptions of sexuality from the preceding ones is exactly the difference with which the relationship between man and woman were understood. Late Victorian male aesthetes and decadents derived their ideas of femininity from more or less misogynous discourses that had been going on through nearly the whole nineteenth century. Arthur Schopenhauer provided some important clues by showing how substantially different the two sexes are: woman is only a half-child for him, a middle stage between a child and a man; woman is an incarnation of all that is temporary (due to her quickly passing beauty, which is the only true feminine quality), whereas man embodies permanence; woman is a creature of a limited or "short-sighted" mind, whereas man is endowed with much broader intelligence; woman is a natural hypocrite and liar; woman's identity is that of a species rather than of an individual, because her only task and goal is to maintain the continuance of the human race; and on top of that all, women are ugly and tasteless and only the man's mind blinded by the sexual drive can call these creatures of small stature, narrow back, wide hips and short legs beautiful. This insufficiency also perhaps explains why women do not understand art and are not able to create real, original, great works of art, the German philosopher maintains. Schopenhauer's controversial ideas were later adopted by Baudelaire, who was fascinated by the images of prostitutes and actresses, women representing Evil, decay, death, matter and all that is natural in contrast to the masculine domain of the spiritual, artistic, artificial, and eternal. Female sexuality is essentially dangerous for man because it is predatory, vampiric and destructive, it is matter

devouring the spirit. Like in the pictures of Felicien Rops, it is a skeleton of rotting flesh and bleached bones hidden behind a beautiful mask.

Elaine Showalter, in her discussion of the character of *fin-de-siècle* sexuality, uses Sigmund Freud's interpretation of the myth of Medusa's head to elucidate what female sexuality meant for the effeminate aesthetic men of the end of the century. For them to unveil the Medusa, whose unshielded gaze turns men into stone, is to confront the dread of looking at the female sexual organs (for the head in the Freudian semantic transposition stands for "an upward displacement of sexual organs"); what lies behind the veil is actually the spectre of female sexuality, a silent but terrible mouth that may wound or even devour the male spectator. This can be interpreted as a reflection of the strict nineteenth-century moral doctrine, by which the female genitalia were a strict taboo for the inquisitive male gaze. But there may be more behind this image of the strange nether mouth, of the "vagina dentata", as it is called. The fact is that female sexuality was really envisioned as a dangerous, sharp weapon. Showalter provides a quotation from Edmond de Goncourt's 1883 journal, in which the novelist noted down his dream about an actress at a party dancing stark naked on a table, and "while she was dancing took steps that showed her private parts armed with the most terrible jaws one could imagine, opening and closing, exposing a set of teeth" (Showalter 1991: 148). Yet even earlier examples of somewhat similar character can be found in French literature of the period. In his poem "Une Nègresse par le demon secouée" (A Negress Possessed by a Demon, 1864) Stéphane Mallarmé lets an old black woman expose her genitalia before a frightened young girl's eyes and during this act her "strange mouth" is preparing to turn the girl into a victim, to swallow her figuratively, which may mean to make a prostitute out of her, the same as the old Negress is – to arm her too with a *vagina dentata*. The most famous tale of *Les Diaboliques* by Jules Barbey d'Aureville, "The Feast of the Atheists", is concluded by a horrible scene in which a deceived husband seals his wife's vagina with hot wax and thus "silences" her, shuts her mouth, for ever.

Roger Caillois (1938) connects the frequent identification of the mouth and vagina, or better the delight of eating and the delight of sexual intercourse, with the castration complex – this may indeed be a strong part of man's psychology in the *fin de siècle*. Parallels between sexual and alimentary attributes are conspicuously frequent in *fin-de-siècle* texts, especially ones between semen and milk, i.e. ejaculation and breastfeeding. In *Dracula* and other vampiric fiction, semen is paralleled with blood, which the sucking vampire feeds on, and the result is identical – contagion: a vampire's victim becomes himself a vampire, one of the *undead*; a prostitute's client becomes syphilitic, one of the *living dead*. But it is also important that Caillois discusses the problem of mouth/vagina identification as part of his treatise on the praying mantis, where he analyses the insect's famous behaviour during copulation, when the female starts eating the male by decapitating him. This may stand as a sexual emblem for many cultures (as is reflected in their myths and legends), but for *fin-de-siècle* sex discourse it provides special poignancy: heterosexual intercourse is destructive, the source of destruction comes from the female part, and this destructiveness is natural because it is validated by nature (there are also other insects that behave similarly); from the male's point of view, it is therefore highly advisable to avoid it and to condemn it. The most obvious substitution then, for *fin-de-siècle* man, is its direct antithesis, homosexuality. Through it he not only avoids nature in her raw impulses, but also his own inabilities: for if the mantis male is destroyed in the very process of reproduction, he is in fact replaced by his progeny and his wilful self-effacement can be interpreted as sacrifice, as a ritualised death on behalf of new life, whereas what the enfeebled, effeminate decadent man fears is complete destruction as a form of punishment for his insufficient physicality, sensuality, and virility.

The focal text of this misogynous *vagina dentata* model in English literature is Oscar Wilde's *Salomé*, where homosexual relationships make up one of the subsidiary motives. Yet

the book in which homosexuality was presented without any restraints indeed is a *fin-de-siècle* novel called *Teleny*, a story of passionate love between an oversensitive young man Camille Des Grieux and a Hungarian pianist of remarkable talent René Teleny. The aim of the following paragraphs, however, is not to deal with the novel's homosexual apparatus, but to suggest to what extent and how it revises the familiar misogynous model – in other words, to see how female sexuality is represented in a text based fully on a male homosexual discourse. Before doing this, it is worthwhile summarising the remarkable history of the book, both in its manuscript and printed form.

The first appearance of the title dates back to the last weeks of the year 1890, when Oscar Wilde brought a wrapped parcel into a recently opened London bookshop *Librairie Parisienne* and asked its owner, Charles Hirsch, to give it to a young man who would come to claim it. In this way the manuscript of *Teleny* – because this was exactly what the parcel contained – was subsequently borrowed and returned by three young men before Hirsch read it himself. Hirsch, who also secretly dealt in pornography, came to the conclusion that this interesting story must have been written by Wilde's intimate friends and that Oscar Wilde had corrected and revised it and contributed some finer parts himself. This view has not much altered since. Shortly after Hirsch's acquaintance with the text, Wilde took the manuscript away and next time the title appeared was three years later when the book was published by Leonard Smithers as *Teleny, or The Reverse of the Medal: A Psychological Romance*. Hirsch noticed some important changes in the text, the most conspicuous being the shift of scene from London to Paris. After Smithers' death in 1909 Hirsch managed to get the original manuscript of the novel and in 1934 *Teleny* came out privately in French translation with Hirsch's introduction giving the above account of its history. Unfortunately, the manuscript was lost, so what we have today are two printed versions of the book – an English one with Smithers' (and perhaps not only his) changes and additions and a French one being a rendition of the original manuscript. A Gay Sunshine Press edition of *Teleny*, published in 1984, is a carefully collated compromise prepared by Winston Leyland.

The novel is a complex work, unlike cheap pornographic writings: its construction is very skilful and consistent, there is a genuine attempt to view the problem of male sexuality with some psychological insight and the text retains a unifying elegiac note. Moreover, there are passages showing the author's intimate interest in arts and music, and these were probably written by Wilde himself. The opening chapter – if we lay aside the formal introductory part conceived conventionally as a repenting confession of the dying Des Grieux – provides the reader with an important clue regarding the feminine world. Des Grieux meets Teleny for the first time at a charity concert given by his mother and the encounter is almost magical: an intense, though unconscious, transfer of sexual powers takes place between the two young men, a transfer resulting in Teleny's unprecedentedly superb musical performance and in Des Grieux's extraordinarily lush imagination instigated by the music. The scene has an obvious Schopenhauerian undertone – sexual desire projected into music as a form of art brings about such intensity of experience which woman, a “sexus sequior”, is not capable of. This clearly postulates the character of discourse which places *Teleny* firmly in the *fin-de-siècle* context.

Though the novel openly presents scenes of sexual activities between men, it by no means shirks a direct depiction of female sexuality, but it is easy to see that the presentation of women has a specific function of creating certain types of frustration in man's mind. There are three major occasions when Des Grieux meets with female sexuality and these moments in a way make up three different types of frustration. The first one is his early visit to a Soho brothel with some of his friends. Here he watches ugly prostitutes displaying different sexual activities to their guests and the experience turns into a disgusting spectacle, a *danse macabre* of fleshliness, a wild carnival of rotting bodies, culminating in the death of a consumptive ghostly girl during her attempt to please an old, fat *cantinière*. Femininity in this scene is

reduced to mere animality, carnality and morbidity; bodily pleasures are indistinguishable from death, as the girl dies at the moment of the old woman's orgasm: "Thus it happened that the death-rattle of the one mixed itself up with the panting and gurgling of the other."<sup>2</sup> This is an extreme Baudelairean or even Zolaesque picture, or rather a caricature of it, and indeed the reader might have heard in it a Zolaesque echo of French naturalism, which met with such a controversial reception in England in the 1880s.

The second occasion comes at the moment Des Grieux is disappointed by Teleny's permanent flirtation with his admirers and tries to forget the pianist. This is the time a new maid named Catherine is employed by his mother and Des Grieux exploits the situation to have sex with her. However much she likes him, she is not willing to give up her virginity so easily and Des Grieux's attempts resemble a violent, yet inefficient conquest: the two fight like wild cats, and although Des Grieux wins finally, he is not able to penetrate her. Catherine's virginity seems unconquerable for him, it is an "insurmountable obstacle", a "stronghold", a "blind alley",<sup>3</sup> and after his vain attempts the young man "exhausted by [his] nightly rambles, [falls] almost senseless by her side". Yet there is another man around, a coachman of the family, who falls in love with the girl, and being disdained by her, he stealthily hides in her bedroom to enjoy her when she goes to bed. This he eventually does, but, as the text says, it "was hardly a question with him now of pleasure given or received, it was the wild overpowering eagerness which the male brute displays in possessing the female, for you might have killed him, but he would not have left go his hold. He thrust at her with all the mighty heaviness of a bull" (90).<sup>4</sup> At first it would seem that there is another echo of Zolaism in this description – in love-making, man is reduced to a brutal force, to a strong beast acting blindly, driven by mere instincts. This brutality is indeed not a victory, because the poor raped girl kills herself by plunging out of the open window immediately after the act. For Des Grieux, however, the experience remains ambiguous – heterosexuality has presented itself as something unattainable unless the refined, "aestheticised" man changes into a violent and rude beast; if not, woman remains an impenetrable, unvanquishable obstacle. Not a *vagina dentata*, but a *vagina obstructa*.

The last scene in which the *fin-de-siècle* man's perception of feminine sexuality is represented comes almost at the end of the novel. Teleny and Des Grieux have to part for several days, during which the pianist will give concerts in Brighton, but in the evening after his leaving Des Grieux, with great surprise, discovers dim light in his rooms. His surprise is all the greater when he peers through the keyhole into Teleny's bedroom and sees his friend having sex with a beautiful naked woman. Des Grieux's voyeurism analogises that of the reader – his covert gaze turns the woman into an *objet d'art*, it objectifies her and in this way desires and appropriates her like any *connoisseur* of beauty and artistic perfection. How immense his shock is, however, when he finds out that the beautiful woman is his own still young mother. Teleny tries to explain his treacherous behaviour as a form of gratitude for Des Grieux's mother's paying his huge debts, but Des Grieux (who has in fact paid the friend's debts himself) does not listen. Instead, he decides to commit suicide, and when he recovers from his unsuccessful attempt, he finds Teleny himself dying in a pool of blood. The third appearance of female sexuality is even more destructive than the preceding two and *fin-de-siècle* man finds a new frustration in it – that of incest. The fear of the Oedipus complex is not only suggested by Des Grieux's possessive voyeurism, but also by the fact that, like in many homosexual texts, Camille Des Grieux and René Teleny are conceived as doubles, as an ideal complementary unity of the male body and mind. Moreover, this late, climactic scene closely corresponds with one of the early episodes when Des Grieux, soon after meeting Teleny and still uncertain about his feelings towards him, has a very intense wet dream in which he copulates with his own sister, a sister he has never had, and at the moment of orgasm is woken up by his mother. Incestuous heterosexuality, as presented in the book, is thus based

on a rather complex identification pattern (Des Grieux-Teleny, Teleny-Des Grieux's sister, sister-mother).

To conclude: the anonymous novel *Teleny*, be it a work of Oscar Wilde or not, not only establishes itself as a typical *fin-de-siècle* text, but also considerably broadens the scope of female sexuality as presented in homosexual male discourse of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The French *décadence* image of *vagina dentata*, representing the castration complex, is importantly matched by three more frustrating images – a Zolaesque image of woman as repulsive, yet untameable flesh, an impenetrable vagina image representing the impotence complex and a mother-as-sexual-object image representing the incest complex. *Teleny* may exemplify the Foucauldian idea of discourse as confession – this time it is an unexpectedly open and unexpectedly rich one.

### Endnotes:

- <sup>1</sup> This work is broadly discussed in Steven Marcus' *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth Century England*, London: Corgi Books, 1969: 12-33.
- <sup>2</sup> *Teleny*, a novel attributed to Oscar Wilde, San Francisco: Gay Sunshine Press, 1984: 61.
- <sup>3</sup> Des Grieux's comments are often metaphorical: "Just as when driving a nail in a wall, the point meets a stone, and hammering away, the tip gets blunt, then turns on itself, so as I pressed harder, the point of my tool was crushed and strangled." *Teleny*: 85.
- <sup>4</sup> *Teleny*: 90.

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