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"MY SECRET LIFE": THEME AND VARIATIONS

(introduced by
Geoffrey Best)

IN JANUARY 1969 A JURY DETERMINED, IN THE QUIETLY CONDUCTED CASE OF THE Queen v. Dobson at Leeds Assizes, that *My Secret Life* was an obscene book without benefit of such academic interest as should entitle it nevertheless to be published "for the public good" under the Obscene Publications Act of 1959. The case was little noticed at the time and to the best of my knowledge has only twice been noticed since: by Donald Thomas in a *New Society* article (reprinted in the last issue of *VS*, pp. 448-451) and in the *New Statesman* earlier this year. Thomas was in court throughout the trial and to another participant his article seems admirably to convey both the atmosphere of the proceedings and the gist of what occurred.

My Secret Life may not, then, in its complete text, be lawfully bought or sold in Britain. The jury was presumably unmoved by those ten witnesses who joined counsel for the defence, John Mortimer, Q.C., in maintaining that it should be published because of its high value to students of literature, history and the social sciences. Perhaps the jury concluded that it had no such value at all. For the moment the legal question is at rest, and there is no knowing either when it might re-open, or whether, when it does, the opinion of "expert witnesses" will again be sought. "Experts" evidently are not of one mind about the book. One whose views must be allowed to carry weight, O. R. McGregor, gave evidence for the prosecution. No others appeared with him in court, but that does not mean that no others share his opinion that the book is of no significant academic value. If there is a serious possibility that this book, which since the Grove Press's publication of the complete text in 1967 has been so much acclaimed as a revelation and a breakthrough into new veins of Victorian understanding, is not after all anything of the kind, the matter is worth debating before a better qualified jury than that at the Leeds winter assizes. While the legal question sleeps, the scholarly issue may be very much alive; and *VS* seems an appropriate place in which to try it. Here, for a start, are brief statements of points of view by three of those who gave evidence at the trial, and by Michael Irwin about the use he finds for it in the course he teaches at the University of Kent. Certain conflicts of opinion and emphasis are apparent but they do not significantly mar the harmony with which this quartet sings the case for the value and importance of the book. Professor McGregor has promised to put an opposite point of view in a subsequent issue and we hope that others besides him will come forward to say what they think about it.

Donald Thomas:

TO BEGIN WITH I MUST PUT MY PREJUDICES ON RECORD. AS A MATTER OF personal taste, I do not find "Walter" a particularly sympathetic character nor is it my experience that, in his case, to know all is necessarily to forgive all. Yet I believe that *My Secret Life* shares with a greater work like the diary of Samuel Pepys a power of presenting that "every day life of thousands" (as "Walter" himself calls it), from which statistical

evidence and historical judgments are abstracted. Given the social and topographical components of *My Secret Life*, the narrative acquires what T. S. Eliot described in his 1936 essay on Milton as the ability to convey "the feeling of being in a particular place at a particular time."

Literature may, of course, convey such a feeling and still not be authentic in the historical sense. Early in the Leeds trial the prosecution suggested that *My Secret Life* might be a twentieth century fabrication, though this line of attack was soon abandoned. If the book is authentic as to date, its value must depend on the accuracy with which it reflects Victorian life and manners. An unsympathetic reader may be strongly tempted to dismiss the accounts of "Walter's" affairs with maid-servants or farm girls as an old man's unattractive fantasies. Yet Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (London, 1862) discusses those "small families," of which "Walter's" seems reasonably typical, and concludes that "Female servants are far from being a virtuous class." Sons of families, according to Mayhew, are responsible for the seduction of these girls, as are policemen on the beat, soldiers in the parks, and shopmen. Marriage is the exception rather than the rule. In Marylebone, at least, the connection between domestic service and sexual vice was so strong that half the women sent from the workhouse into employment became prostitutes.

So far as the incidents with farm girls are concerned, one of the most relevant comments on the sexual morality of the agricultural community occurs in Charles Kingsley's novel *Yeast: A Problem* (1848) when, in Chapter IV, Tregarva answers Lancelot's question, "Are the poor very immoral, then?"

You ask the rector, sir, how many children hereabouts are born within six months of the wedding day. None of them marry, sir, till the devil forces them. There's no sadder sight than a labourer's wedding now-a-days. You never see the parents come with them. They just get another couple, that are keeping company, like themselves, and come sneaking into church, looking all over as if they were ashamed of it — and well they may be.

Tregarva's reply obliges us to consider, for instance, whether the seduction of Hetty Sorrel was quite so exceptional an incident as it appears to be in the context of *Adam Bede*. The second volume of *My Secret Life* with its description of the farm girls and their fate certainly offers a brutal literalism, of which even George Eliot's account of Hetty and Arthur Donnithorne is a genteel reflection. Professor Steven Marcus, in his evidence at the trial, quite rightly observed that certain of the characters in *My Secret Life* were, as he put it, novelistically drawn. Since the book is a discussion of sexual mores it is also interesting to

compare the moral reactions and sentiments of an articulate character, like "Walter's" godfather, with those of a Victorian physician, Dr. Adam Clark, who owed much to Dr. Acton but who, like "Walter's" godfather, makes Acton's seem almost the voice of moderation. Clark's peroration, recorded in John Thompson's *Man and his Sexual Relations* (London, 1889), shows that the portrayal of the godfather is far from being a mere caricature.

Nutrition fails; terrors, fears, and tremors are generated; and thus the wretched victim drags out a miserable existence, till superannuated even before he has had time to arrive at man's estate, and with a mind often debilitated even to a state of idiotism, his worthless body tumbles into the grave, and his guilty soul (guilty of self-murder), is hurried into the awful presence of its judge.

This, in brief, is the type of evidence which persuades me of the authenticity and value of the material presented in *My Secret Life*. The book deals with an area of Victorian life which was equally badly served by "respectable" literature and by pornography. Readers of Victorian fiction are certainly familiar with such protests as Thackeray's, in his preface to *Pendennis*, that "Society will not tolerate the Natural in our Art," or George Moore's insistence, in *Literature at Nurse*, that "We must write as our poems, our histories, our biographies are written, and give up once and for ever asking that most silly of all silly questions, 'Can my daughter of eighteen read this book?'" On the other hand, much of the territory mapped by *My Secret Life* had little appeal for the authors of those cheaply produced but highly priced volumes of fantasy which we now call Victorian pornography. If *My Secret Life* is unique, it is unique in offering another dimension to that aspect of Victorian England which might otherwise have been the preserve of statisticians, euphemistic philanthropists, and journalists eager for something to deplore.



J. A. Banks:

WHEN THE MATRIMONIAL CAUSES BILL WAS BEING DISCUSSED IN THE HOUSE of Lords in 1857 the Lord Chancellor defended the double standard of sexual morality on the ground that "the adultery of the wife might be the means of palming spurious offspring upon the husband, while the adultery of the husband could have no such effect with regard to the wife." Today we should probably be very suspicious of such a patently

rational basis for differentiating between male and female conduct, in spite of our conviction that utilitarian Victorian Englishmen were intimately concerned that their property should be inherited by legitimate heirs. *My Secret Life* provides excellent reasons to justify our suspicions. For example, very early on Walter tells the story of what happened to a middle-class wife who got herself into the kind of position the Lord Chancellor probably had in mind. His cousin, Mary-Ann, who was married to an Indian cavalry officer, was left alone by him for about a year and took as a lover, a drummer boy. Caught in the act, she was sent home to England where she *drank herself to death*. As Walter himself puts it in Volume 1, "all about her was kept quiet" in the family (p. 30). He does not tell us why she took to drink, perhaps he never properly knew her, but it is quite clear that her punishment was not divorce but family ostracism. Is this how the Victorians prevented married women from palming off spurious offspring upon their husbands?

Of course, as both the Q.C. for the prosecution and the Judge at Arthur Dobson's trial were quick to point out, in a general kind of way we knew that this kind of family ostracism took place in Victorian times. Do we, therefore, need the rest of *My Secret Life* merely to have points like this confirmed? The short answer surely is that the whole of Walter's biography is a running commentary on what the double-standard of morality meant to Victorian "gentlemen" who were quite unscrupulous in their sexual escapades. Walter makes it abundantly plain that the respectable women of his own class were for the most part beyond his reach, but by the time he was thirteen or fourteen he had discovered that female domestic servants — far from "gay" women these! — were "fair game" *within* the home (p. 36). Throughout the account of his adolescence and early manhood runs the thread of an acute, if covert, sexual rivalry with his cousin, Fred, who first taught him what to do if he caught V.D. (p. 105). This is a first-hand record of the relationship between Victorian middle-class men that is *not* available *anywhere else* in the literature of the period; and although it is true that without a similar record of the secret conversations between Victorian women of similar ages, told by one of themselves, we shall never quite understand what the double standard of sexual morality really meant, it is now abundantly clear that the sexual exploitation of working-class women by "gentlemen" was in part at least a product of approved forms of emulation amongst the latter. The other side of this — aggressive violence to the point of rape and some working-class connivance by older men and women — has already been illustrated by *My Secret Life* by

Steven Marcus in *The Other Victorians* (New York, 1964) in the context of an interpretation of the humanizing quality of great Victorian literature which, however obscurely, set out to protest against an "intolerable violation of that human nature which – again, effectively, for the first time in history – members of the lower social classes shared fully with their betters" (p. 138, 139). *My Secret Life* does not tell us merely *that* these things happened; it tells us *how* they occurred and what the mechanisms were which led to their perpetuation – at the very moment in history when this type of class exploitation of sexual relationships was being challenged and about to be brought to an end.

In 1884 the Moral Reform Union presented a petition to the House of Lords which complained that "women are constantly annoyed and imperilled by the solicitation of profligate men in the streets and elsewhere." Without *My Secret Life* it is almost impossible to understand what this meant and to avoid the impression that the feminists were exaggerating a number of cases where respectable women had been mistaken for prostitutes. Walter's aggressive refusal to accept a woman's denial, taken in conjunction with protests of this nature, suggests that any woman, especially where it was obvious that she was not a member of the middle class, was likely to be "chucked under the chin, to have her arm pinched, and generally to be subjected to "the familiarities which nature teaches a man to use towards a woman" (p. 59). The interpretation that "in order to understand the full implication of the feminist position it is necessary to emphasize . . . that in their eyes at least, woman was almost always the victim of man's sexual desires,"¹ can now be supplemented by the fuller observation that the feminist position was grounded in fact. Of course, Walter was correct to emphasize that some women were "randy" but the overwhelming impression of *My Secret Life* is that working-class women did not know what to do but give in when a gentleman was as ardent as Walter or his cousin, Fred, for that matter.

In his attempt to account for the passing of Liberal England, George Dangerfield referred to Christabel Parkhurst's *The Great Scourge* as "one of the strangest documents in pre-war English history . . . *The Great Scourge* became popular with evangelical clergymen, who took to distributing the pamphlet among the faithful; and many a Boys' Club and Men's Bible Class must have sat and shivered at the thought

¹ J. A. and Olive Banks, *Feminism and Family Planning in Victorian England* (Liverpool, 1964) p. 111.

of unguessed contamination as Miss Christabel's amazing pages were read aloud."² Before *My Secret Life* was generally available, *The Great Scourge* and the reaction to it were both strange events in pre-war history. Now, these events are not so mysterious. It was Miss Parkhurst's claim that medical testimony about prostitution and general disease had led women to "treat with contempt the gross cant about men's sexual needs, by which it is sought to excuse prostitution and vice. The truth is that the desires of men are inflamed to an unnatural degree by impure thought and action, by excess in the way of meat and drink, and by physical and mental indolence."³ She might well have had Walter's experiences in mind while writing this passage!

But is the book authentic? The question raises the whole issue of what Langlois and Seignobos in 1897 called "The negative internal criticism of the good faith and accuracy of authors"; and, strikingly, every one of their list of motives which "may, in general case, lead an author to violate truth"⁴ can only be answered negatively for Walter. He gained no practical advantage from deceiving his readers; he patently did not distort his experiences to make them conform to the rules and customs of his times; he did not represent himself or his friends in a favourable light; he made no statements "likely to give the reader the impression that he and his possessed qualities deserving of esteem"; he did not apparently desire to please his public, "or at least to avoid shocking it"; he did not apparently distort facts "in order to embellish them according to his own aesthetic notions." By the canons of its time, *My Secret Life* cannot be regarded as such a distortion of the truth as to become suspect. It may, of course, be an exaggeration, but even Walter's potency has been matched in fact. Listen to the wife of Albert De Salvo in 1964 — "the man was insatiable — no-one would believe how over-sexed Al was. It was a shameful thing. He wanted her in the morning; he wanted her again when he came home for lunch; then in the early evening after supper, and again before they fell asleep at night. On weekends, when he was home from the job he now had as an outside maintenance man for a construction company, he needed her five and six times each day. Nor was that enough. When they went out he made suggestive remarks, even in her presence, to attractive women."⁵ When

² George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1936) pp. 190-1.

³ Christabel Parkhurst, *The Great Scourge and How to End it* (London, 1913), p. 123.

⁴ C. V. Langlois and C. Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History* (London, 1898) p. 166. For the list see pp. 166-172.

⁵ Gerold Frank, *The Boston Strangler* (Pan Book edition, London, 1967), p. 261.

so much that has been, to say the least, obscure is illuminated by *My Secret Life*, how can there be a case for refusing to admit it as evidence?



Geoffrey Best:

LOOKING AT "MY SECRET LIFE" WITH THE EYE OF A SOCIAL HISTORIAN, THE first doubt I have to meet is about the extent of its "authenticity." On the one hand there are Walter's statements of intention, that he will tell us the truth about what is universally concealed and hushed up, and that he feels some responsibility to record it accurately. His several explanations of the genesis of the book and of his methods in writing it, though they contain inconsistencies, suggest no duplicity; on the contrary, they indicate authentic "scientific" concern (the same concern which shows, with whatever tinge of absurdity, in his "technical" disquisitions). He knows how some of it — most of all the episodes recalled over a long period — will be difficult to get right, yet he demonstrably wants to get it right and he will feel that he has failed if he doesn't get it right. Whatever his other motivations (clearly they are many and mixed, and include highly personal psychological ones) there really seems to be some element of "scientific" purpose. One looks then to see how far he achieves that purpose, and one sees (on the other hand) certain suggestions that he may not be in every respect as veracious as he intends. Although he expresses scepticism about some men's virile boastfulness, one wonders whether he really had all those successions of orgasms.¹ The tarts he talks to, and whose accounts of their lives seem on the whole so probable, are never (so far as I have noticed; I haven't read *every* page) reported as having criminal connections and only rarely as having "protectors" or ponces; and that seems to me improbable. He knows that they are inclined to fib, yet he does not do much to sift the true from the false in what they said to him. Moreover he obviously likes to believe that they enjoy sex and have quite a good life in general; I suspect he is here being told what he wants to hear, or hearing what they tell him in the only way he wants to hear it. Intensely and convincingly self-critical in many respects, he may not be uniformly so about his sex life; he may — I should like to know how we can check up on this — be more unusual than he needs or likes to think.

Accepting for the moment that the book contains these streaks of

¹ I have not altered that since reading Bank's last paragraph which has persuaded me that my doubts on this score may be set at rest.

fantasy (my word for it) and self-deception, I then ask: how far is its historical value vitiated by them? And I conclude: not at all. One can see them, one can explain them, and then one can ignore them. Apart from them the rest of the work strikes me as remarkably interesting, in non-sexual parts as well as sexual. No one, I imagine, will succeed in making out much of a case for the study of *My Secret Life* on literary grounds, yet some of his descriptions are so vividly done in their plain strong way as to be called “photographic”; as if what he remembered of the circumstances and surroundings of high-pulse adventures had sharpness and clarity not otherwise achieved — a sharpness and clarity he was literary enough to be able to convey. I confess I am very glad to have these, to me, extraordinarily sharp descriptions of houses in both town and country, of suburb and city, of shop, farm and village, for their own sake; though I admit that on their own, as mere topography, they would not add up to any compelling case for the book’s unique importance. It must be the sexual part by which the book stands or falls. The “academic” case against *My Secret Life*, so far as I understand it, is that the book contains little about Victorian sexuality that could not already be known from Acton, Tait and the medics; from Mayhew, Greenwood, Dickens and the journalists; from the blue books (Contagious Diseases, Army Sanitation, Children’s Employment, etc.); and from court reports and preliminary depositions (not that such are at all easy to get hold of). This was the line persistently put by Crown counsel at the trial. It is a line of argument which I simply do not understand. I could better understand, however much I might disagree with, an argument that we ought to know less rather than more about sex in history. That argument could at any rate rest on a clear and intelligible principle, and the puritan arguing it could do a better job on moral grounds than the academic man arguing on historical ones that *My Secret Life* tells us little that we don’t know already that is valuable for us to know. Walter’s endless pages on the so to speak technical aspects of sex that mattered so much to him are indeed academically valueless for me because I lack the psychological skills to learn anything from the way he writes about them; and, as someone at the trial remarked, one orgasm tends at bottom to be very much like another, and we don’t need Walter to tell us what it’s like. No, it is not Walter the sex-obsessed egotist writing about himself that directly helps me understand Victorian society better, but Walter the sharp observer of contemporaries in postures and situations open as well as secret; Walter the unself-conscious reporter of attitudes, conversations and encounters otherwise barely imaginable; Walter playing out his roles as young master, man of property and club-

man swell, and noting with unusual care the ways his acquaintances and partners played out theirs.

What value his revelations hold must be measured by each according to his capacities. Myself largely ignorant of psychology, I can't judge what use may in course of time be made by a coming breed of super-historians, crammed with the social sciences, of all Walter's obsessions and fixations about women pissing, the sight of female genitals, etc. How far these sexual interests, which to me (with different interests, in an age of different interests) seem peculiar, were unrepresentative in his own age, and how far his evidence in all its copiousness can serve towards the establishment of Victorian norms, I have no idea. But it seems to me no more unrealistic to expect that it will in course of time contribute towards that end, than it must often have been "unrealistic" to expect practical applications for "pure research" in the natural sciences. One finds out what truths one can, and lets the consequences follow as they may. Nearer the foreground of the application of *My Secret Life* is its evidence about life as it actually was in school, shop, club, brothel, farm, fair, and above all the superior-class household, where the young master was able to have female servants so remarkably his own way. That boys group-masturbated, that shop-girls prostituted themselves on the side, that the clubmen bachelors of some sorts of club thought of little but drink, horses, and women, that employers in home or business took sexual advantage of their female servants, that country fairs were "immoral" — we have not lacked for allegations about these things and we have even had scrappy "hard" evidence of them; but not before Walter's explicit unhurried descriptions have we known just how they were. If the knowledge of *how it was* (I cannot improve on that unoriginal way of putting it) is not part of the heart stuff of history, then I don't know what is; either that, or my idea of social history is different in a radical degree from someone else's. Between what the pre-Walter authorities tell us about Victorian sexuality and what Walter tells us there is the same difference as between a factory inspector's description and Alfred Williams' *Life in a Railway Factory*; between Sir Edmund du Cane's annual reports and *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*.



Michael Irwin:

AT THE UNIVERSITY OF KENT WE INTRODUCED EXTRACTS FROM "MY SECRET LIFE" into a course called "Dickens and his Age." The object of this course

was to study the major novels in a context of Victorian ideas, attitudes and social conditions. The students were offered various sorts of auxiliary material, from examples of contemporary journalism and caricature to a tour of Dickens' London. The extracts from *My Secret Life* formed part of this material, serving, in the way Professor Marcus has suggested, to "thicken our sense of Victorian reality." What I would like to do here is to emphasise what seemed to me the book's remarkable aptness for this task.

Kent has gone in for contextual studies since the university opened, but we are still continually learning how better to make them work. A recurring problem has been to vivify the background information. In a number of literary courses we have discussed relevant social or intellectual history, but too often this aspect of the work has tended to remain inert, academic. In the Dickens course, therefore, a particular aim was to relate the background material in a more direct way to the students' literary response. The general purpose of this kind of course is presumably familiar enough. The contemporary reader would be tacitly comparing a Dickens novel to the actual world around him. He could sense automatically how far the author was exaggerating, romanticising, stylising. But today's students can obviously have no such instinctive grasp of Victorian reality. Some fall into a circular process of response, in effect relating the novels to a pseudo-reality deduced from them. They have a vague conception of a Dickensian England of picturesque street-life, comic domestics, and brutal orphanages. Orthodox social history cannot easily correct such notions because it operates at so different an imaginative level.

So for our purposes one essential usefulness of *My Secret Life* is that it dramatises, "realises," certain areas of Victorian society. The information comes over not in terms of generalities or statistics, requiring imaginative interpretation, but, as in a novel, through anecdote, character, dialogue, personal comment. Walter and Dickens cover much common territory; for instance, both write extensively about domestic servants, the poor, and the low life of the town. Walter's material, of course, is cold fact, and as such it sheds light on Dickens' material both where it corresponds and where it differs. Its special service to the teacher is that it challenges this fruitful comparison by evoking much the same sort of literary response as a novel does. But also useful is the fact that the social comment in *My Secret Life* carries instant conviction. The reason for this lies in the special nature of Walter's obsession. If he were concerned only with fornication his memoirs would amount to little. What intrigues him is the whole process of encountering, accosting, and seducing. Each of his conquests is related with an almost labor-

ious regard for circumstance, and a significant part of the circumstance is the history and disposition of the woman involved:

"I was always curious with a woman whom I had poked, and till I had heard something about her was not satisfied. Whether lies or truth I always got a history of some sort out of a woman of Mary's class, and usually got the main facts truly. I have tested them. But not so with gay women, they mostly lie heavily." This pursuit of accuracy extends to reported speech. He often claims to be recording a conversation word for word, and he puts in caveats about his inability to transcribe dialect. On occasion he will amplify a woman's statement with what amount to stage directions: "This was said nearly as I write it, not as an apology, but as a narrative told in the most natural way possible, and in a sorrowful tone." One effect of this literalness is that *My Secret Life* becomes, among other things, a marvellous anthology of Victorian speech styles. I felt that part of the book's contribution to the Dickens course was in bridging the gap that the student feels between the stylised dialogue of the novels and colloquial talk today.

But the fundamental issue here is Walter's apparent concern with accuracy for its own sake. The conversations he reports are the more convincing because he clearly does not feel, as a novelist would, any temptation to make his characters speak more oddly, touchingly or amusingly than in fact they did. Each entertaining or terse dialogue is authenticated by several dull or rambling ones. Neither does he seem to feel any urge to edit or interpret the social information he records. Many of the most striking details seem to have been put down almost unthinkingly. When he hears of a fourteen year old girl, who earns sixpence a day at sack-making, but has to pay twopence to have her sacks carried home for her, his reported response is: "Can she put her finger up her cunt?" He could hardly be more remote from any ideological *parti pris*. Walter's own responses, whether negative, as here, or positive, provide a further source of period knowledge. Despite his hobby, he is a surprisingly representative figure. Many of the Victorian attitudes and values he exhibits come over with unusual force precisely because the context is so unlikely. He enjoys spying on servants through the bathroom wall, but comes close to drawing the line when his girl cousins appear: "It's a damned ungentlemanly thing, Fred." Although he has seduced a number of married domestics he feels guilt when sleeping with the wife of a gentleman acquaintance: "I revolted at the idea of visiting a man, eating his food, drinking wine with him, shaking him by his hand, and then behind his back tailing his wife." There is even scope

for Victorian sentimentalism. When cousin Fred is posted to India he laments the probable faithlessness of his mistress: "Tears stood in his eyes. 'You give her a grind, old boy, if she must have it, I'd rather you did it than anyone, and it will keep her quiet . . .' He went abroad, and was killed in battle. I loved him."

If Walter's circumstantiality corresponds to something in the novels of his time, then so does the sense of honour, so does the manly emotion. Like Dickens he is didactic — even, in his own way, something of a moralist. This kind of comparison, of course, shades off into tautology or truism; all men reflect their age. But it *is* useful to be able to judge how far such a writer as Dickens is original in thought or feeling, and how far he speaks for his period. Such judgments are usually hampered by the lack of a representative figure, not an artist, who has revealed his mind and values in objective terms. Walter's great gift to the literary student is himself: a specimen Victorian gentleman, trapped in the amber of his own eccentric honesty.



PLANS TO MAKE THE FIRST
NUMBER OF THE NEXT VOL-
UME A SPECIAL ISSUE ON
"THE VICTORIAN WOMAN." ES-
SAYS AND SUGGESTIONS
ARE INVITED. FOR PLANS
AND PURPOSES, SEE "COM-
MENTS AND QUERIES"
(P. 240).