

The Secret Rooms of *My Secret Life*

Deborah Lutz
Hunter College

MY SECRET LIFE, A VOLUMINOUS SEXUAL MEMOIR written by an anonymous upper-middle-class gentleman who identifies himself by the name Walter, was published in a very limited and private manner in 1888. As genre, the diary of sexual experience fascinates in a number of different registers. One of its primary interests comes from the collector's impulse. Collectors seek to contain and archive an essentially disorderly world always seeping out of one's grasp and running away into irrevocable decay, forgotten days, a present becoming irremediable past. Collecting might stanch the unquiet flow, create a cleared space which arrests and makes sense of a random heterogeneity. A diary follows the collector's impulse; it is a collection of days and the experiences marked off within the day's space. A sexual diary seeks to hold on to experiences not only by recording—crystallizing them through obsessive inscription—and sharing them with others, but through the repetition of more or less the same experience again and again. Generally the pornographic project is to repeat a series of moments of supersaturated meaning—moments which also *mean* the same thing, again and again. As Steven Marcus explains in his discussion of Victorian pornography, the pornographer has no interest in generalizing, summary, or even, finally, in concluding. Each little

narrative has its temporary and natural teleology in the orgasm. Once this climax comes, the narrative possibilities are limited to retelling the same story, with only slight variation. "Generalization is in fact anathema to pornography," Marcus writes,

for what generalization does is to sum up or bring to conclusion a train of concrete instances; most of all it dispenses with the need for a further production of such instances, for a repetition of them. But it is precisely in repetition, in repetition sustained to infinity and beyond, that pornography and its allied phenomena live and move and have their being. (51)

Pornography in general and *My Secret Life* in particular are collections of instances rendered with scrupulous and concrete detail.

"The collector is the true resident of the interior," Walter Benjamin writes (9). Reading *My Secret Life*, one is struck by the rich detail when houses and rooms are described. For instance, a typical interior of a house of assignation is described as follows:

It was a gentleman's house, although the room cost but five shillings: red curtains, looking-glasses, wax lights, clean linen, a huge chair, a large bed, and a cheval-glass, large enough for the biggest couple to be reflected in, were all there. (72)

Such mappings are the topoi of Marcus's famous term "pornotopia"—an idealized world where geography exists only to further erotic desire. Interiors are described and plans of houses are laid out merely as sites more or less convenient for various types of erotic positionings, gazes, and fulfillments. To analyze the interiors of any pornographic work is to let the gaze wander from the central theme of the work; it is to soft focus the erection, the movement, and the orgasm and to concentrate on the housing of the activity, the way it dwells in and occupies its space. The materiality of the sexual encounter (already a very material activity) can be defined by taking as part of its very ontology the ways it interiorizes. Intimacy is in many ways always about interiority. To look inside, to penetrate inside, to be inside is topographical as well as sexual. *My Secret Life* continually explores this linkage of pornography with place, sexual confession with intimate space. The most interesting spaces of *My Secret Life*, and the ones I will focus on here, are those that trouble the simple binary opposition of inside and outside, centering on the boundary and the threshold.

Walter's interest in thresholds can most easily be understood on the register of sexuality. Penetration is a crossing of a bodily threshold, a

DEBORAH LUTZ teaches nineteenth-century English literature at Hunter College in New York City. Her forthcoming book, *The Dangerous Lover: Gothic Villains, Byronism, and the Nineteenth-Century Seduction Narrative*, traces a literary-historical itinerary of the lover whose eroticism comes from his remorseful and rebellious exile, from his tormented and secret interiority. She is currently working on a book on Victorian pornography.

movement from the exterior of the other's body into the interior (well, for the male, that is). One section, entitled "small entrance, large interior," describes the narrator's surprise at the way the woman's genitals mysteriously guard a sometimes unknown quantity. His curiosity never abating, Walter spends literally hundreds of pages describing how this threshold looks and feels. He creates a classification of types and discusses how many of each type he has seen, out of the thousands of women with whom he sleeps. Marcus's Freudian reading of the narrator's insatiable collecting turns on Oedipality. Walter's interest in the vagina is to again and again ask the question: where is the penis here, and, if it's not here, does that mean I don't have one? But putting the psychoanalytic aside, the topoanalytic also sees a bottomless questioning, not a searching for something that will never appear, but rather an ontological wondering about the limitlessness of unquantifiable space, what it might or might not contain, and whether or not the subject can situate himself inside and/or outside it. The author desires to penetrate space and then describe its secret inhabitings, yet at the same time he wants to keep in play the mysteriousness of spatiality. The desire to maintain the unknown is readily apparent in Walter's interest in various kinds of thresholds between rooms, which work as spatial analogues to human cavities and orifices and the obsession with being just on the outside or just entering.

Walter Benjamin, in his tribute to nineteenth-century interiorizing and exteriorizing, the *Arcades Project*, describes a similar type of desire predicated, he feels, on what he calls "threshold magic": "Like all magic substance, this too is once again reduced at some point to sex—in pornography. Around 1830, Paris amused itself with obscene lithos that featured sliding doors and windows" (214). A magical feature lies in not knowing what might pass over the threshold and come into the interior, if one is inside. If one is outside, then the magic is in trying to cross the threshold and move within or in wanting to stay, playing, around the threshold. The last two types of magic belong to the narrative of *My Secret Life*.

Somewhere around the halfway point of the eleven volumes of *My Secret Life* our man becomes obsessed with looking around and through doors and walls into hidden rooms and into the secret lives of others that might be enclosed within. This desire begins in European hotels where he stumbles upon peepholes and is thus enabled to see couples having sex. He begins to look for such opportunities and even makes his own peepholes with a portable gimlet as he wanders from one hotel to another. He eventually stages such scenes in brothels. Becoming fairly obsessed with clandestine watching, he begins narrative after narrative with such asides

as, "The peephole gave me endless amusement" (1957), or "Next night at the peephole" (1960), and "Then very fit I went there and to the peephole" (1967). His scopophilia is clearly another way of penetrating into interiors, just as his obsession with the sexual interior of women is in entering or in the moment of crossing. A typical secret liminal between two interiors is described as follows:

I heard a male and female voice in the chamber adjoining, which was connected with mine by folding doors. I had only arrived there that morning. I looked for a peephole but saw none. A big chest of drawers was placed across the door, obscuring the key hole. It was empty, yet with much difficulty I moved it aside, and then found that a piece of furniture was placed in a similar way on the other side. Balked, I looked for my gimlet and couldn't find it. Then I noticed that the doors, very badly made as they usually are abroad, did not shut into a recess, but folded on my side against the architrave or top framework, and did not at the top appear to fold close owing to their having warped. I mounted the drawers, but was then not tall enough, so putting one of my trunks on them I mounted that, and then thro a long chink at the top, saw half over the room, which was like mine, an unusually large one. (1195-96)

The odd folding doors that don't quite fit seem to emerge from a dream-
scape or fairytale where such openings lead to magical experiences, such
as the "open sesame" of Ali Baba and the forty thieves or the incongru-
ous doors of children's stories that open into another world such as in
C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. Gaston Bachelard
phenomenologically celebrates doors in his *Poetics of Space*:

But how many daydreams we should have to analyze under the
simple heading of Doors! For the door is an entire cosmos of
the Half-open. In fact, it is one of the primal images, the very
origin of a daydream that accumulates desires and tempta-
tions. (222)

The ontology of the half-open strongly tempts Walter. The imagination
illuminates the threshold when it is partially obscured, emphasizing an
interior, perhaps empty or full.

To step over magical thresholds, to penetrate from one hidden space
to another are movements endemic to the genre of pornography. Through
the author's act of scopop penetration via this "large chink," he creates a
kind of containment for the intimate living of others and the ways they

To step
over magical
thresholds, to
penetrate from
one hidden
space to another
are movements
endemic to the
genre of
pornography.

sexually dwell in their interiors, a way of having or collecting them for himself. Walter tries to possess others in his peculiarly distant way by looking into intimate spaces and watching private acts. Possessing for him means experiencing sexuality (sometimes limited to spying on sexual acts, as we see here) and then recording that experience in his diary. Further possession comes through placing his experience and that of others in space, or interiorizing. His possession *materializes* his experiences, embodies them; the author's excitement in the above episode comes from creating secret spaces to expose. Textualizing his experiences constitutes the next step—recording them in words. Reading the approximately three thousand pages of *My Secret Life*, one comes to see that the author wants to have sexual knowledge of as many bodies, orifices, and erotic spaces as possible. In fact, this is one of the major drives of his life and his memoir. Thus is he a collector, and in this way he seeks to order and memorialize experience. Recording singular acts of dwelling in his diary, he makes them available for others to toy with through the act of reading. He can then contain and classify his experience, his diorama of sexual acts framed by place.

The possession of the erotic interiorizing of others becomes more complicated as Walter's desires develop and mature. He comes to carefully create his own architectural events in European brothels. The most desirable and satisfying floor plan involves at least two rooms connected by secret thresholds of various sorts. These hidden liminals could be peepholes, keyholes, sliding panels, or masked doors. The author desires not only to peep—to watch prostitutes with other men—but he uses architecture to create a hidden thirdness and a variety of clandestine penetrations through thresholds. Desire resides in these rooms in an overdetermination of liminals and an obsession with various kinds of thirdness. Probably the most elaborate of these experiences takes place in a German-speaking brothel. His current favourite prostitute has another male client on the way, so the author slips into a second room—the first woman's sister's room—in order to watch them having sex. Again through an ill-fitting door the narrator watches the unfolding scene. The sister happens to be in her room semi-naked, so the author finds himself faced with an embarrassment of riches. While keeping half an eye on the sister in the room he currently occupies, Walter first watches through the crack and carefully describes (after the fact, in his diary, of course) the two having sex in the next room. Then, by prearrangement but without the other client's knowledge, the prostitute makes an excuse and slips briefly through a door different from the one they entered by, but which leads into Walter's room. His first want is the

usual one with him: to look at the way the other man has filled her interior. "There was the lovely cunt, its red surface well nigh hidden by white thick sperm. The sperm hung to the fringe, it lay thick low down on the orifice of the avenue into which the libation had been poured" (1745). The mysteriousness of this already fascinating interior is increased now that it is hidden. The pornographic subject wants to display the secret interior, yet keep it hidden all the same, and this double movement is situated on the boundary line and its point of penetration.

The other man's semen is the trace—the residue of dwelling sexually. Benjamin writes that "To dwell means to leave traces. In the interior, these are accentuated" (9). Viewing the material evidence of "secret lives" (the narrator's code for "sexual lives") means proving that they really did happen. Part of his interest in interiors lies in knowing concretely what happens in them—sexually speaking, of course. But this knowledge must, for him, come from repeating himself the acts that happened in those interiors. Much of the titillation of the re-enactment comes from reimagining the act that just happened without him, there in the other room. He writes, "The lascivious delights roused in my brain, at the idea of my prick being in the temple which a man had just enjoyed and left, haunted me spite of myself" (1884). While he fills interiors—having sex in a room and ejaculating in a woman's vagina—he imagines the similar act of dwelling that happened earlier. Not only does he pine for erotic knowledge of the other and his/her experience, he wants to *be* that other man ejaculating then; he wants to *be* the woman and be filled with semen.¹ He wants to *be* in that other room, interiorizing it and being watched by himself. Even though he watched the intercourse, what he finds particularly compelling is that it happened in a place he was not. It is the "visions of what he had just seen" (1747) that make him "wild with lust" (1744) when he looks at the first prostitute and that bring on "the desire to have her just as she was, to cover my prick with his sperm" (1745). The titillation of the other interior lies in the fact that he was not *in* it, that he could merely *see* it. He wants to penetrate her, as usual, but he also wants to penetrate an interior that *has already been occupied* and that shows so clearly the traces of this occupation. In some sense, he wants the other man's penis to be in her vagina at the same time as his own penis, yet even more strongly he wants to feel the absence and past, lost presence of the finally inaccessible sex

1 "How I should like to experience a woman's sensations as her cunt heats and moistens, and desire for the man gradually rises till it overwhelms her, and she yields" (1940).

As collector,
his project here
is to multiply
instances of
erotic acts and
their geography,
and it is equally
to record a
movement
of presence
and absence, a
series of known
or unknown
spaces.

act. Like all pornographers, the author has the desire to fill spaces and see them filled, but another desire consists of imagining spaces whose very fullness speaks of his own absence. Fascinated by interiors that exteriorize him, not only does he stage his being a third in an activity between two, but he stages his outsideness.

In the next movement of this scene, the first woman goes back to the anonymous man and has sex with him again, while Walter watches once more. As all of this is occurring the second sister observes, becoming a fourth, and eventually joins in through various sexual exploits with the narrator while the first sister is in the other room. For instance, while the anonymous man is performing cunnilingus in the other room on the first prostitute, a typical incident happens as follows:

The gamahuche [cunnilingus] of her sister was in my mind, she was perhaps being gamahuched at that moment. The letch seized me, and applying my tongue to the Fraulein's cunt, I licked it rapidly, thinking of her sister's gamahuching, wishing we were all in the same room, and gamahuching side by side. (1746)

Walter's desire increases precisely because of the distance marked between the two interiors and the barriers that separate them, despite his declared wishes. He both wants these blocked thresholds to stay in place and wants their abolishment. Also at work in this oscillation at the point of entry is a desire to have these secret interiors kept secret by the paradoxical entrance of a third, or even a fourth as we have in this case—either to witness the secret penetration, to participate in penetrating the interior (as does the second prostitute when she watches Walter peep and observes him in his penetrations of the first prostitute), or to emphasize the hiddenness of the interior by keeping knowledge of it from another (here the anonymous man). As collector, his project here is to multiply instances of erotic acts and their geography, and it is equally to record a movement of presence and absence, a series of known or unknown spaces.

The author plays at being the master of this architecture because he controls the movement of the repeated penetrations (of people in and out of doors, of the gaze in and out of thresholds, and organs in and out of orifices), yet he also wants to be the slave of the other room and his lack of control over what goes on there. He pines to repeatedly feel the loss of the desired other. He wants to see her walk through that door once again, on her way into the arms of the other man. Losing control over these thresholds he has so carefully put in place is clearly part of his desire, but does he want, on some level, to lose himself in the other, to become pure

absence? Such self-dissolution can come from an extreme desire to plumb the unknown and to imagine one's life going on without one's own existence. Here this imagining takes the form of a room others occupy busily, where one is not. The author's strategy is to enter such interiors again and again, while at the same time affirming the time before he was there and the time after he will be gone. One might argue here that the narrator is attempting a Wordsworthian sublime. Unlike Kant's sublime subject, the Wordsworthian subject spills over in an orgasmic excess. Such a self could dissolve at any moment into nature, into an ecstatic unity with the world. The author of *My Secret Life* seems to desire to erotically dissolve himself in the other, to no longer exist, ecstatically. It sometimes feels that Walter would like to lose subjectivity altogether and disappear into an erotic force that could move from interior to interior indiscriminately. Yet it is precisely *not* the sublime he desires: rather than reaching the impossibility of representation, what he wants most is the repetition of pure presentation which includes both presence and absence. What Walter most loves about sexuality is its materiality, its bare meatiness and its solid affirmation of existence. And he loves the spaces it takes up and its need to be hidden. Yes, he wants to experience his absence, but *materially*. Imagining actual interiors where he is not present, penetrating vaginas where some other has just been, the author toys with his own and others' materiality, their actual embodying. As I've pointed out in the beginning of this article, Marcus argues that pornography never generalizes but, rather, repeats instances, moments, and scrupulously rendered concrete detail. The author of *My Secret Life* wants always to move through these particular rooms, to record these very singular moments; he doesn't desire transcendence but always immanence.

The author's interest in space and absence comes from his curiosity to know what is inside. This curiosity becomes stronger and more exciting the more impossible it becomes for him to occupy those spaces himself. The most mysterious interiority he longs to penetrate appears to be that of the other, here represented by the woman's vagina. One of his central motivations in sex is to see and know "all that women had hidden of their bodies, to compare and note differences, and ask every one of them questions about their sexual tastes, sensations, and habits" (1584). Desiring to plumb the spaces that open up inside the other, he repeats crossing that threshold again and again. Yet it's not really that he wants to *know* the other. Out of the thousands of women he has sex with—most of whom he pays—he never seems to really know any of them. In fact, this is not really his project. His project is to contain those interiors, first by looking at them

One could
argue, using
an odd kind of
logic, that the
author's desire
to feel his own
absence is a
need to open up
spaces within
himself.

and penetrating them and second by inscribing them in this text. *My Secret Life* becomes a collection of the other's interior, literally rendered.

As we see, the narrator only wants to know interiors sexually. He shows no real desire to truly understand or even to fully explore the depths of interiors—this includes the interiority of others as well as such interiors as the rooms of houses. After all, his diary remains a work of pornography. Hence one must wonder if what he is really after is to penetrate his own interiority. Somehow his interest in collecting all of these interiors, his repetition of the same again and again, seems to bespeak a different desire, one never fully satiated. In the impossibility to fully understand his own interior spaces, Walter compulsively handles, classifies, and lists those of others. Such an argument follows a logic similar to Marcus's Oedipal analysis as noted above—Walter repeatedly looks to see if women have penises because he's worried about the state of his own. Looking for the absences in others' interiors, he really would like to find and understand his own. One could argue, using an odd kind of logic, that the author's desire to feel his own absence is a need to open up spaces within himself. The continuation of Bachelard's quotation about doors, cited above, is relevant here: "In fact, it is one of its primal images, the very origin of a daydream that accumulates desires and temptations: the temptation to open up the ultimate depths of being, and the desire to conquer all reticent beings" (222). Does the author desire to open up the ultimate depths of being? No, this would certainly be arguing too much, but the narrator certainly wants to open erotic spaces inside himself. Such openings, speaking pornographically, show a need to invaginate himself, to create space that then can be penetrated. As part and parcel of his creation of scenes of hidden interiors, as described above, he desires to possess his own secret interiors. He wants to feel invaginated by these interiors he orchestrates; he wants the doors and holes to become ways his subjectivity can be repeatedly penetrated. Thus the massive collection of interiorizing instances that become *My Secret Life* return fully to their title. His work becomes a constant movement to hollow out what is the *most* secret life because it is hidden inside his own interiority. What else is a diary for if not to investigate one's inner life? Interiors sexually excite him because his own interiors remain hidden and tantalizing.

To return to a preoccupation of the author's discussed in the beginning of the essay, the collector's impulse remains to categorize, compartmentalize, and archive a disorderly world. The author clearly feels this need to keep in order, to contain and hold on to his experiences between the covers of his diary. His topophilia creates just another category that orders,

that keeps experience inside and controllable. Also a drive to keep his own subjectivity bounded, the diary uses interiorizing—both of himself and others—as a means to possess and control. Yet one is constantly struck by the overall failure of the writer's great project. The incredible wealth of this overflowing work; the almost constant desire of the author to once again experience, possess, and classify interiors; and the final lack of any kind of concluding, convinces the reader that Walter never does succeed in creating interiors large enough or complex enough to hold the richness of his sexual world. Neither does he seem to ever reach the end of his own vast interior. His search for his own absence can be fulfilled not by the little deaths of repeated orgasms but only by death itself.

Works Cited

Anonymous. *My Secret Life*. New York: Grove Press, 1966.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. by Maria Jolas. Boston: Beacon, 1994.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Intro. by Howard Eiland. Trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. London: Harvard UP, 2002.

Marcus, Steven. *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England*. New York: Basic, 1966.

Copyright of English Studies in Canada is the property of English Studies in Canada and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.