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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Victorian Review*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (Fall 2008), pp. 19-25

Published by: [Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27793665>

Accessed: 24/04/2012 13:28

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Teaching Victorian Pornography: Hermeneutics and Sexuality

DONALD E. HALL



WHAT DO we do with pornography in the classroom? We are hardly going to discuss at any length the extent to which it achieves its generic purpose—sexual arousal—even though that often constitutes part of the discussion of other genres (the structural successes of a poetic text, for example). Yet there are many other pedagogically productive uses to which we can put porn. In this brief overview, I will discuss a text and theory frame that I find particularly useful in the classroom. Following the overview is an annotated bibliography by Andrew Urban that offers a wide variety of other theoretical approaches. Yet, however much they may seem to differ, common to all of these perspectives is the belief that porn challenges us in unique and compelling ways to test our worldviews against its version of reality and to test its reality against an ideal of ethical and interpersonal responsibility.

I have taught with and about pornography in Victorian cultural studies classes for almost two decades now, and have regularly assigned selections from *The Pearl*, *The Oyster*, and other widely reprinted underground periodical works to supplement more canonical works in explorations of gender, nation, and class ideologies during the era. However, I turn most often to *My Secret Life* as an especially useful text. Not only is it lengthy and rich in incident, but it is, most likely, a factual or semi-factual memoir, one that I discuss in class as a work of much more than wild imagination—it is, to some extent, a work of social, cultural, and philosophical revelation. And what it reveals meshes particularly well with the body of theory that I introduce into the classroom as my pedagogical frame: philosophical hermeneutics. *My Secret Life* offers a rich terrain for a discussion of human interrelationship and evolving senses of selfhood and ethical responsibility (and lack thereof). Its worldview tests and challenges ours and makes for an intense and unsettling reading experience.

Indeed, it is a reading experience of a reading experience—a hermeneutic bonanza of sorts. Philosophical hermeneutics, originating in the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, suggests that we live in a process of dialogue with all that surrounds us: the literal voices of other individuals, as well as the culturally embedded voices of “tradition” and “prejudice” (*Truth and Method* 276–77). Gadamer urges us toward ethical responsibility in telling us to embrace that

dialogic existence, to acknowledge our own partiality of perspective, and to throw ourselves forthrightly into a critical “reading” of others’ perspectives, while at the same time allowing our perspectives to be read and unsettled by our interlocutors (see Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, especially part 2, and the introduction to Palmer’s *Gadamer in Conversation* for helpful overviews).

Gadamerian theory allows us then to focus on the narrator of *My Secret Life*—specifically his attempt to read and respond to the traditions of his era and read his own incorporation of those traditions—as he struggles to put an alternate, neo-libertine sexual philosophy into action. Walter repeatedly asks variants of the following questions:

Why may a man and a woman handle each other’s privates, and yet it be wrong for a man to feel another’s prick, or a woman to feel another’s cunt? Every one in each sex has at one period of their lives done so, and why should not any society of association of people indulge in these innocent, tho sensual, amusements if they like in private? What is there in their doing so that is disgraceful? It is prejudice of education alone which teaches it is. (248)

In musing in this way, Walter is engaging in the very skeptical hermeneutic inquiry that Gadamer calls for—questioning prejudice and attempting to sort out prejudice’s effects. His bodily failure at times to “put into practice” what he believes (most memorably when he attempts anal intercourse with another man but cannot sustain an erection) allows for sustained reflection in the text on the power of “prejudice” to determine even our physical responses.

At his most intellectually and personally daring, Walter pursues his philosophy of sexual rebellion in active discussion with others, most notably his long-time companion Camille, who (in his recounting) is as eager for sexual adventures as he is. After the passage critiquing the “prejudice of education,” quoted above, he writes,

In these opinions I was strengthened by repeated conversations with Camille [who] had a wonderful cool common sense way of looking at things. When I had doubts about the propriety of doing this or that, she would solve them with answers which appeared to me irrefutable, at length. We seem to have been on the subject of unusual pleasures whenever we met.—In fact we were constantly talking about varieties in lustful enjoyments. She would sit down smoking a cigarette, and I a cigar, and consider whether there was wrong in frigging, gamahuching, minetting, tribadism,¹ or sodomy.—In men frigging each other, or women doing the same, and other things. Our conclusion was that there was no harm in any of them. (249)

He is similarly loquacious with two other partners, Sarah and Helen, who also join him in an intense interrogation and abrasion of Victorian sexual norms.

The generation and transmission of those traditions is also usefully revealed in the text. From an early age, Walter is exposed to the worst myths of Victorian pseudo-sexology, repeatedly being told by his godfather, for example, that masturbation leads to tragedy: "You look ill . . . you've been frigging yourself . . . I can see it in your face, you'll die in a mad-house, or of consumption" (59). Walter says, "He repeated this so often that it sunk deeply into my mind, and made me uneasy (35). In classroom discussions, we explore then how this deep distress makes him an easy target for manipulation and, soon thereafter, leads him also to become an active abuser of others.

Walter is thoroughly acculturated into the reigning gender and class power structure, first, by his older cousin Fred (described as "a very devil from his cradle" [31]) who mocks his timidity and insecurity, trains him to treat servants with contempt, and manipulates him into peeping at and sexually fondling his sleeping younger sister. These lessons are then redoubled by another "older friend" who forcefully imprints on Walter the exact process by which Victorian young men should "seduce" women: "Tell her you have seen her cunt, and make a snatch up her petticoats when no one is near; keep at it, and you will be sure to get a feel, and some day, pull out your prick, say straight you want to fuck her, girls like to see a prick, she will look, even if she turns her head away. This advice he dinned into my ears continually" (67). In his first attempt to put his friend's words into action, he accosts Charlotte, one of his family's servants, whom he first verbally harasses: "then she began to cry. Just as I was begging pardon, my friend's advice again rang in my ears, I stooped and swiftly ran both hands up her clothes" (67). In repeated acts of increasingly aggressive sexual assault, he continuously hears his friend's voice: "Snatch at her cunt,' rang in my ears" and then "My friend's advice came again to me: pushing my right hand still between her thighs, with my left I pulled out my prick, as stiff as a poker" (69). "No" does not mean "no" for Walter because he, backed by gender and class Victorian ideologies, has learned to discount the voice of the woman pleading with him. With his friend's words continuing to ring in his ears, he commits his first act of rape. While he has many interlocutors who help him challenge Victorian sexual norms, he never attends to or values the voices that challenge the class- and gender-based components of his worldview.

Indeed, however much potential Walter has as an incisive reader of Victorian sexual discourse, he is hardly an exemplar of Gadamerian inquiry. The worst implication of a hermeneutic approach to human interaction and other human beings is the possibility of outright objectification. And that is exactly what Walter is repeatedly guilty of, and in sometimes horrific ways. His treatment of children is especially disturbing, with several acts of procurement and sexual usage of young girls recounted. Similarly, on a trip to France, he pays to watch two "Negroes" have sex, and attempts sex with a woman of African

heritage, and he describes the acts and the individuals involved in the most de-humanizing and racist ways. In innumerable scenes, he “reads” others without following through on the Gadamerian injunction to allow them to challenge his own prejudices or perspectives.

The most common response that such scenes elicit in class is, not surprisingly, outrage. However, outrage is not in itself analysis. And I have found that *My Secret Life* offers a unique opportunity to work with students (undergraduate or graduate) on the ways of transforming *reaction* into *analysis*. If we do not approach every text, even a pornographic one, with the Gadamerian attitude of attempting to understand its world view and understand the origins of its prejudices, then we too are guilty of a form of objectification. That does not mean that we should shy away from holding it fully accountable for its failures, especially in the realm of ethical responsibility, which is central to Gadamerian theory. But if we are going to be intellectually and pedagogically responsible, we must do both: find ways to sympathize with it, to the extent that we can, as well as necessarily judge it for its shortcomings. Because *My Secret Life* so often and painfully strains our ability to “fuse” (*Truth and Method* 306) successfully with it (Gadamer’s term for an ideal meeting and mutual transformation of two world views), it offers unparalleled pedagogical and hermeneutic opportunities. In energetic classroom dialogues detailing our diverse reactions to such a challenging text, I find invariably that we are better able to read not only it, but also our critical selves.

Notes

1. Gamahuching and minetting are both terms for oral sex, while tribadism is a term for lesbian genital-on-genital rubbing.

Works Cited

- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 2003.
- My Secret Life*. Anonymous. Ed. James Kincaid. New York: Signet, 1996.
- Palmer, Richard E., ed. and trans. *Gadamer in Conversation: Reflections and Commentary*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2001.

Select Annotated Bibliography on Pornography and Pedagogy

ANDREW URBAN

Bold, Alan Norman, ed. *The Sexual Dimension in Literature*. Totowa, NJ: Vision, 1982.

An anthology of critical works on sexual representations in literature. Peter Webb's article "Victorian Erotica" will be of use to those interested in teaching pornography from the era.

Ferguson, Frances. *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004.

Parallels the rise of pornography in Western Europe during the late eighteenth century with the interest in utilitarianism. Readings focus on Sade, Flaubert, Lawrence, and Bret Easton Ellis, to argue that "pornography—like utilitarian social structures—diverts our attention from individual identities to actions and renders more clearly the social value of such actions through concrete literary representations."

Hall, Donald E. "Graphic Sexuality and the Erasure of a Polymorphous Perversity." In Hall and Pramaggiore, eds., *RePresenting Bisexualities: Subjects and Cultures of Fluid Desire*. New York: NYU Press, 1996. 99–123.

Traces changes in the representation of "bisexual" activities over the course of several centuries. Discusses *My Secret Life* in the context of Victorian pornography in which the heterosexual/homosexual binary is increasingly evident.

Kendrick, Walter. *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1996.

Explores the changing public perception of pornography and censorship from the Greeks and Romans to contemporary culture. Topics covered include the pornography trials of *Madame Bovary* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, television, photography, and the Internet. Ashbee, a potential author of *My Secret Life*, is discussed at length in the chapter "Adventures of the Young Person."

Kirkham, Pat, and Beverly Skeggs. "Pornographies, Pleasures, and Pedagogies in U.K. and U.S." *Jump Cut* 40 (1996): 106–13.

Explores conflicting approaches to pornographic films in feminist scholarship. Kirkham and Skeggs suggest that by abandoning censorious attitudes toward pornographic film, we may "deconstruct pornography's power to demean, humiliate, and objectify."

- Legman, G. *The Horn Book: Studies in Erotic Folklore and Bibliography*. New Hyde, NY: University Books, Inc., 1964.
- A bibliography and overview of English-language pornography, compiled by the official bibliographer of the Kinsey Institute. Includes an extensive treatment of the publication history of *My Secret Life*.
- Lutz, Deborah. "The Secret Rooms of *My Secret Life*." *ESC* 31.1 (March 2005): 118–27.
- An exploration of spaces within the novel that "trouble the simple binary opposition of inside and outside, centering on the boundary and the threshold." Related to these thresholds, Lutz also examines Walter's interests in collecting and categorizing as a means of possession and control.
- Marcus, Steven. *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid Nineteenth-Century England*. New York: Norton, 1966.
- Drawing from a Freudian theory base, Marcus offers a reading of Victorian sexuality and its ideological restraints. One of the earliest studies in the field of Victorian sexuality studies, Marcus's work explores sexological treatises on prostitution, *My Secret Life*, and other Victorian texts.
- McCormick, Donald. *Erotic Literature: A Connoisseur's Guide*. New York: Continuum, 1992.
- A history of pornography from the classical era to the present, along with author entries and a glossary of terms. The fourth chapter ("The Era of Erotic Memoirs") discusses *My Secret Life* and other Victorian erotic texts.
- Morrison, Todd G. *Eclectic Views on Gay Male Pornography: Pornucopia*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth, 2004.
- Covers diverse topics such as life-writing, media images, radical feminism, prison systems, and constructions of national identity as represented in gay pornography. A chapter on educating gay male youths explores pedagogical applications for gay pornography.
- Rogers, Janine. "Sex and Text: Teaching Porno-Erotic Literature to Undergraduates." *Dalhousie Review* 83.2 (Summer 2003): 189–214.
- Advocates the instruction of "porno-erotic" material in the university at the undergraduate level. Rogers claims that "porno-erotic" texts can reveal "some of the most intense aspects of sexuality, textuality, and pedagogy in academia."
- Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk. *Unauthorized Pleasures: Accounts of Victorian Erotic Experience*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003.
- Citing medical documents, historical accounts, popular literature, private correspondences, and memoirs, Rosenman counters readings of Victorian sexual repression. Chapters focus on spermatorrhea panic, gender and the city, *The Mysteries of London*, Theresa Longworth, and *My Secret Life*.
- Sigel, Lisa Z. *Governing Pleasures: Pornography and Social Change in England, 1815–1914*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2002.
- Examines sex, gender, race, and class through the medium of Victorian pornography. Sigel explores the material production, distribution, and consumption of erotica in the Victorian era as she suggests a fluid definition of pornography.

TEACHING THE VICTORIANS: Donald E. Hall

———, ed. *International Exposure: Perspectives on Modern European Pornography, 1800–2000*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2005.

A collection of essays spanning the past two hundred years of European pornography. Four of the ten essays focus on the nineteenth century, including readings on German obscenity law, censorship of pornographic novels at the Bibliothèque Nationale, English pornography and slavery, and the late Victorian and Edwardian interest in incest pornography.

Williams, Linda, ed. *Porn Studies*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2004.

Argues that pornography requires a serious and strenuous examination by academics. Subjects covered include Andy Warhol, Brandon Lee, pinups, gay and lesbian film, comics, as well as several others. Taken as a whole, this text offers numerous possibilities for teaching pornography from a theoretically informed position.

