Weird Sex: 
*Teleny* and the History of Sexuality

The story usually goes like this: in 1890 Oscar Wilde purchased a number of French novels and books ‘designated by the euphemism of “socratic”’ from Charles Hirsch, a clandestine erotic bookseller in London. Some days later, Wilde dropped off at Hirsch’s establishment a ‘tied up and carefully sealed’ manuscript (p. 172). This document was called for, taken away, and returned three times by three different men before Hirsch’s curiosity finally drove him to open the package. Inside, he found the jointly-written manuscript version of what would eventually be published as *Teleny or the Reverse of the Medal: A Physiological Romance of To-Day* (1893), which Brian Reade claims was ‘the one English novel until then in which the main story was concerned with homosexuality at its fullest extent’. The novel describes the sexual awakening of Camille Des Grieux, a young businessman, through an affair with the Hungarian pianist René Teleny. Hirsch, impressed by what he called the ‘extended scholarship, [...] elegant style, [and] sustained dramatic interest’ of the book’s defense of same-sex desire, claimed to have heard no more about *Teleny* until it appeared three years later under the Cosmopoli erotica imprint published by Leonard Smithers, who would soon become famous as the publisher of England’s major decadent authors (p. 173). It was produced in a richly bound edition of two hundred copies.
selling for five guineas each. According to Hirsch, however, the Cosmopoli edition differed significantly from the handwritten manuscript he read: it switched the setting of the action from London to France (supposedly Paris, though this version of the novel never specifies the city by name) and removed the original manuscript’s prologue.³

This narrative of Teleny’s genesis has been irresistibly suggestive for critics, especially those who have used the novel to reconstruct a crucial moment in the history of Western sexuality. Prominently featuring Wilde, the man considered by many to be the originator of the modern image of the homosexual, as he organizes the circulation of a text jointly written by a group of men as they take turns describing their desires and the unique sense of self those desires imply, Hirsch’s story operates almost perfectly as an allegory for the formation of homosexual self-identification at the Victorian fin de siècle. The key elements are all there: secrecy that paradoxically provides an enabling opportunity for the inscription of homoerotic desire; the clandestine textual circulation that creates the foundation for sexual identity; and a defense of that new identity category through recourse to the rhetoric of biological ‘naturalness’. Teleny would appear to encapsulate the various discursive forces operating at the watershed moment when, as Michel Foucault famously writes in the History of Sexuality, ‘the aberration’ of the ‘sodomite’ transforms into the ‘species’ of the ‘homosexual’.⁴

The problem, however, is that this oft-repeated story is entirely apocryphal. Hirsch did not offer his history of Teleny’s composition until 1934, some forty-one years after its initial publication, in the preface to his French translation of the text. While Hirsch claimed his edition was based on the original manuscript, switching the location ‘back’ to London and including the ‘original’ prologue, there is no documentary evidence to support any of his claims. Until quite recently, however, this dubious story was repeated with greater or lesser degrees of credulity in nearly every major analysis of the novel for the past four decades.

Why has this story been seized upon so readily? I argue that a close examination of the novel’s most explicitly pornographic scenes reveals that they do not anticipate the bourgeois, individualistic liberal gay subject described by Foucault and suggested by allegorical readings of Hirsch, but are instead more closely related to the cosmic horrors found in the genre of weird fiction. While Hirsch’s account is some of the only information we have about the origins of this historically significant yet mysterious text, critics’ determination to make
interpretive hay out of this dubious story, to the point where it becomes central to their arguments about *Teleny*, also points to a determined investment in a particular conceptual framework for understanding the history of Victorian sexuality.

Recurrent references to Wilde’s involvement with the lost original manuscript of *Teleny* are, among other things, an attempt to lend literary and historical credibility to an otherwise disreputable text. Critics thereby reenact a phenomenon not commonly associated with gay pornography, but with another less-than-respectable mode of writing also that also developed in England during the 1890s: weird fiction. Leif Sorensen and Roger Luckhurst have both identified *pseudobiblia*, the invention of fake books, fake libraries, and fake traditions as a literary strategy that ‘lies at the core of the weird archive’ going back to the late Victorian tales of Arthur Machen and M. R. James.5 According to Sorensen, *pseudobiblia* is an attempt to make up for the ‘lack [of the] kind of institutional standing that renders an archive official or legitimate’, and fulfils the need to belong to an alternative canon that does not actually exist.6 Smithers, one of the only publishers willing to take on Wilde’s works after his imprisonment, claimed in his ‘Adverts Prospectus’ for *Teleny* that it contained ‘scenes which surpassed in freedom the wildest license’, and ‘the culture of its author’s style’, a phrase Amanda Mordavsky Caleb asserts was meant to punningly suggest Wilde’s involvement with the original version of the text without affirming it explicitly.7 Due in part to this connection, Smithers claimed that *Teleny*’s handling of the combination of literary polish with homosexual eroticism was an innovation worthy of a minor form of canonicity: ‘It is a book’, he said, ‘which will certainly rank as the chief of its class, and it may truthfully be said to make a new departure in English amatory literature’.8 Joseph Bristow states that the text of *Teleny* itself is notable for ‘situating the main characters’ same-sex yearnings in a far-reaching tradition that links rebellious romantics like Shelley to classical writers such as Plato. Unquestionably, *Teleny*’s wealth of cultural references [...] suggests that this work sought to lend scholarly authority to its impotent portrayal of gay sex’.9

References to the lost original manuscript of *Teleny* are, despite their appearance in legitimate academic criticism, similar to weird fiction’s creation of a legacy for imaginary occult texts like the *Necronomicon*, which was first referred to in the writings of H. P. Lovecraft and subsequently proliferated in texts by later authors.

Both *Teleny* and weird fiction writing inhabited the same decadent cultural milieu. In 1892, the year before he published *Teleny*, Smithers published Machen’s
translation of the French pornographic text *The Memoirs of Jacques*. Machen's most famous early novels, *The Great God Pan and The Inmost Light* (1894) and *The Three Imposters: or, the Transmutations* (1895), were all published in the Bodley Head's decadent Keynotes series. After the scandal of the Wilde trials in 1895, the publisher John Lane requested that Machen expurgate *The Three Imposters*, a novel which, while not explicitly pornographic, describes the titular characters wandering the streets of London in search of a coin commemorating an orgy put on by the Roman Emperor Tiberius and culminates in a mysterious, violent, and implicitly sexual pagan ritual. The setting of *Teleny* in London (or Paris), with its depictions of clandestine gay sex parties in aristocratic homes and phantasmagoric public spaces cruised by ‘night-walkers […] sickening faces of effete, womanish men […] trying to beguile [him] by all that is nauseous’, that give Des Grieux a ‘creepy feeling’ that ‘nevertheless was so entirely new that I must say it rather interested [one]’, anticipates depictions of urban wandering in search of the perverse found in both *The Three Imposters* and Machen’s *The London Adventure; or, the Art of Walking* (1924) (pp. 85, 87, 86). In this latter volume, Machen describes ‘the magic touch which redeems and exalts the dullness of things’ found in ‘unknown, unvisited square’ and introduces, in Luckhurst’s words, ‘the possibility of levering open other realities of the mundane world by stumbling across them’. In *Teleny*, this other world is the underground gay social and sexual network that hides its luridness just below the surface of everyday life in the metropolis.

While there does not seem to be definitive evidence that Machen was influenced directly by *Teleny* or vice versa, I maintain that these connections are more than merely incidental, and moreover, that their implications have been obscured by the desire to write *Teleny* into a Foucauldian version of the history of sexuality. While it is clear that the novel is first and foremost a gay pornographic text, many episodes exhibit qualities more commonly associated with the weird. Lovecraft, in his well-known essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature* (1927), asserts:

Most of the choicest weird work is unconscious; appearing in memorable fragments scattered through material whose massed effect may be of a very different cast. […] If the proper sensations are excited, such a ‘high spot’ must be admitted on
its own merits as weird literature, no matter how prosaically it is later dragged down.\(^\text{13}\)

This definition has led James Machin to describe the weird as a literary ‘mode’ rather than a genre, giving one ‘free rein to identify “weird elements” in other works that could never convincingly be wholly appropriated as weird fiction, were it a genre’.\(^\text{14}\)

It is certainly true that \textit{Teleny} presents to us what looks like a recognizably modern understanding of gay identity, written as it was during an era when law and medicine were creating new sexual typologies and categories. Yet the presence of the weird mode in one of the earliest identifiably ‘homosexual’ texts suggests that we should reconsider elements of the now-standard accounts of the history of sexuality that has taken root in Victorian studies. Like weird fiction, \textit{Teleny} can also be read as a response to ‘scientific discovery in the nineteenth century’ which, Luckhurst writes, ‘dethroned anthropocentric conceptions of the world’.\(^\text{15}\) Although it is not often considered in the context of weird fiction, this would include the Victorian pseudoscience of sexology, which portrayed sexual ‘perverts’ as individuals without agency, victims of uncontrollable pathological impulses. As scientific authorities consolidated their power to define the subject, they took away queers’ ability to define themselves, delimiting them to the monstrous, criminally degenerate body of the sexual pervert. As Foucault famously states, this made ‘his sexuality […] the root of all his actions, because it was their insidious and indefinitely active principle’.\(^\text{16}\)

Sonja Ruehl writes that for Foucault, sexual ‘categories have a rigidifying effect, imprisoning individuals whose lives are administered under them’.\(^\text{17}\) Attempts to characterize \textit{Teleny} as part of what he calls the ‘reverse discourse’ of homosexuality—a conscious response to the prison of gay identity by defending same-sex desire as innate, natural, and nonthreatening—domesticate what is most disturbing about the novel: its often horrific portrayals of homo- and heteroerotic desire operating outside the logic of individual intention, intertwining with a drive to annihilate both the subject and the object of erotic desire.

Lovecraft defined the weird as a

\begin{quote}
breathless and unexplainable dread of outer, unknown forces.
\end{quote}

\[\ldots\] There must be a hint, expressed with a seriousness and
portentousness becoming its subject, of that most terrible conception of the human brain—a malign and particular suspension or defeat of those fixed laws of Nature which are our only safeguard against the assaults of chaos and the daemons of unplumbed space.\textsuperscript{18}

Similarly, \textit{Teleny} depicts all sexual acts, both homosexual and heterosexual, as embodying a fantastic yet nevertheless entirely material energy that erupts into everyday life and violates the ostensibly ‘natural’ laws of Victorian domestic ideology. Rather than attempting to redeem gay identity from pathology, \textit{Teleny} universalizes sexology’s dehumanization of the sexual subject. It shows how all forms of sexuality, when examined with the intensity and attention to detail characteristic of pornography, expose the chaos underlying the ‘fixed laws of Nature’, sharing weird fiction’s desire to destroy the philosophical foundations of liberal-humanist subjectivity. The novel turns sexology’s pathologizing of the homosexual body on its head not by reversing the discourse, but instead by showing sexual desire to be an impersonal force that is cosmically indifferent to the minds and bodies it inhabits.

\textbf{Reversing the Reverse Discourse}

To be sure, there are a small number of moments in \textit{Teleny} that seem to anticipate modern liberal defenses of homosexuality. Des Grieux, the novel’s protagonist and narrator, asks

\begin{quote}
Had I committed a crime against nature when my own nature found peace and happiness thereby? If I was thus, surely it was the fault of my blood, not of myself. Who had planted nettles in my garden? Not I. They had grown there unawares, from my very childhood. (p. 107)
\end{quote}

This is an early version of a biologically essentialist, ‘born-this-way’ understanding of same-sex desire as rooted in bodily difference and unchangeable. This has led critics to emphasize that the historical moment that produced \textit{Teleny} also produced the ‘reverse discourse’ of homosexuality. According to Foucault, nineteenth-century medical and legal discourse effectively created the deviant and
pathological ‘homosexual’ subjects whose sexual practices they sought to regulate. Yet this process resulted in homosexuals consciously embracing this identity. The reverse discourse is when homosexuality ‘began to speak on its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturality” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified’. Homosexuals themselves thus actively participated in the ‘multiple and mobile field of force relations wherein far-reaching, but never completely stable, effects of domination are produced’.20

As Aaron Ho argues in his assessment of the novel’s critical history, studies of Teleny apply […] Foucauldian theory as an ‘unquestioned’ analytical paradigm for understanding its depiction of late Victorian homosexuality.21 They proffer a historicized reading that characterizes the novel as historical evidence from a key moment in the development of modern sexual identities. Ed Cohen, in his well-known and influential article ‘Writing Gone Wilde: Homoeotropic Desire in the Closet of Representation’ (1987), portrays Wilde as Teleny’s ‘general editor and coordinator’ and states that even if Hirsch’s account of its genesis ‘proves apocryphal, the unevenness of its prose styles suggests that the novel was the collaboration of several authors and possibly a set of self-representations evolving out of the homosexual subculture in late Victorian London’.22 This assumption supports Cohen’s argument that the narrative is ‘a counterhegemonic representation of homoerotic desire’ and affirms ‘the naturalness of […] homoerotic experience’ by presenting the ‘new joyous possibility’ of gay identity.23

Even studies that have attempted to revise Cohen’s thesis operate under the assumption that the novel represents a coherent vision of gay identity more or less identical to the one we know today. Lisa Sigel repeats the Hirsch story to call attention to ‘the simultaneous arrival of a gay identity […] and a full-fledged consumer culture’, and uses the novel as evidence of the connection between those two discourses as ‘one of the first pornographic novels to explore homosexuality as an identity rather than a practice’.24 Similarly, Matt Cook uses Hirsch’s narrative as evidence for the existence of ‘a circle of men, possibly centered around Wilde, working together to construct a decadent fantasy of homosexual life and sex in London’.25 For Diane Mason, Teleny exposes the ‘problematic’ nature of ‘this early point in recognisable gay history’, insofar as its attempts to defend same-sex desire rely on the ‘medical models’ provided by sexologists, and are thus ‘curative rather than celebratory’.26 As Leo Bersani has argued, the effect of this assumption
has been that literary historians of sexuality present the late Victorian era as the moment when 'an intentionally oppositional gay identity' was developed that 'by its very coherence, only repeat[ed] the restrictive and immobilizing analyses it set out to resist'. Foucault argues that oppressive power structures discursively bring into being those identities they ostensibly repress in order to consolidate the networks of power themselves. Thus, the repressive hypothesis can only function if the ideal of liberation remains available to the homosexual subject.

These studies tend to ignore the weird elements arising strangely during *Teleny*'s most explicitly pornographic moments, which foreclose the possibility that sexual desire can ever be liberated into a healthy, unpressed expression. These episodes undermine characters’ sense of self-possession and make the text an uncomfortable fit for the ‘reverse discourse’ narrative. The novel portrays desire as not merely out of the individual’s control, but as a force residing outside of and as a threat to the self. The first erotic encounter between the two main characters occurs when Des Grieux attends a concert where Teleny is playing. While listening to Teleny’s music, Des Grieux becomes hypnotically ‘spell-bound, yet I could hardly tell whether it was with the composition, the execution, or the player himself’ and starts seeing visions of ‘the Alhambra’, ‘the sun-lit sands of Egypt’, and ‘the gorgeous towns of Sodom and Gomorrah’ (pp. 6–7). Once ‘the pianist turned his head and cast one long, lingering, slumberous look’ at Des Grieux, his hallucinations become more intense and explicitly erotic: ‘[A] heavy hand seemed to be laid upon my lap’, Des Grieux recounts, ‘something was bent and clasped and grasped, which made me faint with lust. The hand was moved up and down, slowly at first, then fast and faster in went in rhythm with the song’, bringing him to the brink of orgasm (p. 7). Later, during their first conversation, Teleny asks Des Grieux if he ‘believe[s] in the transmission of thought, of feelings, of sensations’ before revealing that he had the same visions, accompanied by a desire for ‘that powerful withering love that shatters both the body and the soul’ (p. 15). ‘Our glances met, and then there was a current between us, like a spark of electricity running along a wire, was it not?’ asks Teleny. ‘Yes, an uninterrupted current’, responds Des Grieux (p. 18).

Caleb identifies this key moment in the novel, which is both the first explicitly pornographic scene and, effectively, the beginning of Des Grieux and Teleny’s romantic relationship, as partaking of the late Victorian discourses of ‘telepathy and spiritualism’. This connection is solidified during a later moment, when
Des Grieux describes how he was able to enter telepathically into the mind of both Teleny and a woman known as ‘the Countess’ while they have a heterosexual encounter; he makes reference to ‘the doings of the Psychical Society’, more commonly known as the Society for Psychical Research, to explain how such a phenomenon was possible (p. 57). For Caleb, this indicates the extent to which the authors of *Teleny* had absorbed the latest scientific discourses, including sexologists’ insights into role of “psychic symptoms” [...] in many cases of sexual perversion’ (p. xv).29 By contrast, Robert Gray and Christopher Keep argue that the novel’s language of sexual electrification ‘signifies the productive passing of desire from one individual to another in the text’ in a way that mirror the round-robin composition of the novel, and which resists cooptation to sexology’s naming of the single, isolated, and pathological ‘homosexual’.30

Yet the paranormal qualities of Des Grieux’s experience of desire are shot through with feelings of dread, fear of the unknown, and a loss of personal agency in the face of an overwhelming material force that resides outside the self, thereby presenting a sexualized version of the weird’s depiction of a threatening, unknowable universe. He describes his psychic encounter with Teleny and the Countess as preceded by the sense that ‘my inward self seemed to disintegrate itself from my body’ (p. 50). When he becomes ‘spell-bound’ by his initial experience of homoerotic desire, he gives up his individual agency in a manner that is as odd and disturbing as it is attractive and alluring, surrendering himself to a disturbing parody of sublime vision. After Teleny stops playing, Des Grieux’s fantasies mutate from eroticism to horror. He sees Sodom and Gomorrah succumb to a fiery hail, a rain of rubies and emeralds that was consuming the cities of the plain, and he, the pianist, standing naked in the lurid light, exposing himself to the thunderbolts of heaven and to the flames of hell. As he stood there, I saw him—in my madness—change all at once to the dog-headed God of Egypt, then by degrees into a loathsome poodle. I shivered, felt sick, but speedily changed into his own form again. (pp. 7–8)

Des Grieux’s vision transforms from awe-inspiring Biblical destruction and mythical creatures from an exotic oriental past into an unsettling and campily bizarre ‘poodle’, before he finally returns to normal.
Unlike the feeling of ‘excitement but with horror’ that characterizes one’s experience of the Kantian sublime, Des Grieux’s homoerotic fantasy partakes of what China Miéville describes as weird fiction’s puncturing of ‘the supposed membrane separating the sublime’ from more quotidian experiences, and ‘allows swillage of that awe and horror from “beyond” back into the everyday […].’ The weird is a radicalised sublime backwash. Rather than eliciting a new sense of either self-knowledge or group identity, Des Grieux’s homoerotic experience culminates in an odd mixture of melancholy and apprehension. ‘Analyzing my feelings’, he says after having an odd sex dream where he imagines that Teleny is his sister (a person who does not exist in real life, but only in Des Grieux’s fantasy),

I was now conscious that a new sensation has come over me—a vague feeling of uneasiness and unrest. There was an emptiness in me, still I could not understand if the void was in my heart or in my head. I had lost nothing and yet I felt lonely, forlorn, nay almost bereaved. (p. 22)

Des Grieux’s desire transforms into a ‘void’ and an ‘emptiness’, an unidentifiable lack that creates a ‘vague’ and subtle sense of dread.

The vision of same-sex desire represented in *Teleny*, far from being a motivating force for the articulation of a homosexual identity that seeks liberation from the strictures of a compulsory heterosexuality, instead calls attention to the presence of a disavowed violence driving the construction of any identity whatsoever that bases itself upon sexual object choice. It is, in other words, a text that implicitly rejects sexology’s attempt to discipline the unruliness of sexual desire through the creation of quasi-scientific categories of identity based on object choice. It presents sex as a chaotic force undermining the supposedly ‘natural’ laws of Victorian domestic ideology and its disciplining of sexual impulses toward socially productive ends, replacing it an understanding of sexuality as a destructive force that is beyond human comprehension, and that seeks to obliterate both the subject and the object of desire. When Des Grieux explains why he did not recognize the presence of his homoerotic desires until the age of twenty-four, he states that

Withal, I never understood that I loved men and not women. What I felt was that convulsion of the brain that kindles the
eyes with a fire full of madness, and eager bestial delight, a fierce sensual desire. Love, I thought, was a quiet chaffy drawing-room flirtation, something soft, maudlin and aesthetic, quite different from the passion full of rage and hatred which was burning within me. (p. 34)

Retrospectively, Des Grieux believes his inability to comprehend his sexuality stemmed from an opposition between the intellectual and the emotional, what he ‘understood’ and what he ‘felt’. For him the concept of ‘love’ had nothing to do with bodily sensations such as the ‘convulsion of the brain’, ‘bestial delight’ or ‘sensual desire’. Instead, he believes himself to have been indoctrinated into a coercive ‘quiet chaffy drawing room flirtation’ ideology of love that completely disavows the role of physical desire in romantic attachments. It is only when he meets Teleny that he feels the ‘fire full of madness’ that is his first adult experience of erotic attachment. Sharon Marcus has argued that, contrary to studies that view nineteenth-century queer culture as inherently opposed to Victorian domestic ideology, *Teleny* presents ‘a bond between male lovers organised around domestic privacy, interiority, aestheticism, and sentiment’. Yet at this moment, Des Grieux realizes that Victorian domestic ideology, which finds cultural expression in narratives of genteel courtship between the sexes, has tricked him into believing that romantic love had nothing to do with the ‘passion full of rage and hatred’ that is his experience of sexual desire. When he realizes that ‘sensual desire’ is the unspoken yet omnipresent foundation undergirding romantic love, he can finally articulate his true erotic orientation, that he ‘loved men and not women’.

Upon consideration, however, Des Grieux’s description of his erotic desires as a ‘passion full of rage and hatred’ becomes strange, one might say ‘weird’, insofar as they appear to be the exact opposite of what is commonly referred to as the experience of ‘love’. To understand why this is so, it is important to keep in mind the rhetorical work Des Grieux performs to impose coherence on his sexual identity. He has the task of constructing a narrative that accounts for two seemingly contradictory statements: first, that Des Grieux had a sexual attraction towards other men that was always already there (as he says later, ‘I know that I was born a sodomite, the fault is my constitution’s, not mine own’ [p. 47]); second, that he did not become aware of that sexual attraction until a specific and particular moment in his life, i.e. meeting Teleny. In order to make these two assertions cohere
into a unified narrative of sexual maturation, he has recourse to the ‘quiet chaffy
drawing room flirtation’ model of romantic love, whose denial of the body made
it so that he did not understand what his erotic desires ‘really’ signified until those
desire were powerful enough with a ‘passion full of rage and hatred’ to obliterate
that socially instantiated discourse of romantic heterosexuality. Thus, the oddness
of Des Grieux’s violent articulation of his sexual desire becomes understandable:
for his narrative of sexual development to work, Des Grieux must experience his
sexuality as opposed to the ‘soft, maudlin and aesthetic’ ideology of genteel domestic
heterosexuality in order to negate it and therefore attain the knowledge of a sexual
orientation that was ‘really there all along’. To maintain both the coherence of
his sexual identity over time (‘I had always loved men instead of women’) and
account for the sudden realization of that identity (‘I finally realized I loved men
when I met Teleny’), Des Grieux must posit the existence of a hegemonic and
coercive ideology of genteel heterosexuality that becomes violently negated by an
experience of homosexual desire that is its exact opposite.

In this way, Des Grieux’s description of coming to understand his desires
echoes the less explicit, but no less disorienting, experience of Joseph Walters, the
‘young man with spectacles’ in Machen’s The Three Imposters. Walters narrates that
he participated in a pagan sexual ceremony by drinking ‘the Wine of the Fauns’
which

boiled in my veins, and stirred, I think, something that had slept
within me from the moment I was born. It seemed as if my self-
consciousness deserted me; I was no longer a thinking agent,
but at once subject and object. […] I was bidden to enjoy myself
and care for nothing but pleasure.33

This passage uses rhetoric similar to Des Grieux’s description of his coming to
sexual self-knowledge, but not for the purpose of establishing the innateness of
sexuality identity. Instead, Walters here depicts the violent, identity-annihilating
capacities of sexual desire, a drive seemingly detached from either ‘subject’ or ‘object’
that uses the body as a conduit for the proliferation of a weirdly disembodied
and impersonal ‘pleasure’ that echoes Bersani’s well-known description of desire
as the enjoyable dissolution of selfhood.34 When read through the lens of the
weird rather than the Foucauldian reverse discourse, Des Grieux’s account of his
sexuality reads less like a liberal-humanist defense of his desires and more like an admission of the horrifying nature of sexuality itself, a revelation that emerges when it is untethered from the ‘chaffy drawing room affair’ of domesticity.

**Weird Heterosexuality**

*Télény* repeatedly shows the chaotic force underlying all forms of sexuality, both homo- and heteroerotic. The novel represents straight sex, perhaps to an even greater extent than gay sex, as a ‘passion full of rage and hatred’, primarily motivated by a drive to destroy both the subject and the object of erotic desire. Early in the novel, Des Grieux relates in vivid and horrifying detail his memory of an adolescent trip to a brothel with a group of school friends, where they observe the ‘loathsome’ sight of a consumptive woman coughing up blood while performing oral sex on another prostitute until she dies of a broken blood vessel, with ‘the death-rattle of the one mixed […] up with the panting and gurgling of the other’ (p. 45). In a passage that ironically echoes his description of the ‘passion full of rage and hatred’ that is his experience of homoerotic desire, Des Grieux describes how

> the cantinière continued to writher in her senseless and ungovernable rage, twisting and distorting herself; but at least feeling the warm blood flow into her womb, and bathe her inflamed parts […] began to pant, to scream, and to leap with delight, for the ejaculation was at length taking place. (p. 45)

Although this is, obviously, a sexual act occurring between women, the fact that it is done for the sexual arousal for a group of young men exposes reveals the perversity underlying normative male desire. This episode is an especially vivid moment from what the text’s overall trajectory of demystifying the heterosexual ‘laws of Nature’ by repeatedly calling attention to the violence underlying heteroerotic desire.

Later, Des Grieux describes an incident when his coachman raped his chamber-maid, who had rejected the coachman’s offer of marriage. She does so because Des Grieux had cruelly manipulated her into falling in love with him, even after he realized he was primarily same-sex oriented, for his own amusement. He explains that, at the moment of the rape, the coachman
hardly knew whether he loved or hated this girl most, and he cared but little what became of him provided he could satisfy his craving for her. All the softness which love had awakened gave way to the sexual energy of the male. [...] 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 let go his hold. (pp. 74, 76)
power’ purely for his own enjoyment, her suicide is motivated not only by the violence done against her person per se, but by her realization that ‘the love of men’ is ultimately nothing but the desire to ‘satisfy a craving’ for power, and that at the height of sexual passion, the identity of that craving’s object is entirely incidental. Both men simply want to subordinate her into the object of their own desires. In this, one of the few moments when the novel focuses on female sexuality, the chamber-maid’s experience effectively eliminates the constitutive difference between a homosexuality full of ‘rage and hatred’ and heterosexuality. For a woman, the ‘love of men’ really is all the same, insofar as all male sexuality is a ‘passion full of rage and hatred’ that works towards the obliteration of the object of erotic desire through a destructive and seemingly impersonal sexual appetite.

Sodomical Annihilation
The incident of the chamber-maid’s suicide, by focusing on the similarity between male heterosexuality’s and male homosexuality’s capacities to abuse women, forcefully calls attention to persistence of violence that is the result of the unequal power dynamic that exists between the sexes in a patriarchal society. Yet the text also presents the gay sex that is its primary pornographic focus, and which it supposedly valorizes, as similarly violent and reason-destroying expression, a ‘paroxysm of erotic rage’ and ‘mad delirium’ inherent to sex itself (Teleny, p. 99). In the case of male homosexuality, sexual encounters are portrayed as radically destructive of the boundary between the subject and the object of erotic desire, rather than the destruction of the object of desire by itself. This becomes shockingly literal in the scene depicting Des Grieux’s attendance at his first gay orgy, which culminates with a character called ‘the Spahi’ asking to be anally penetrated by a glass bottle. First, the experience obliterates the distinction between mind and body, reason and sensation, with the Spahi saying that it makes him feel ‘a sharp and yet agreeable irritation from the bum up to my brain’ (p. 134). This enjoyable confusion of the higher and the lower faculties soon transforms into violence when the bottle breaks inside him, ‘cutting all the edges that pressed against it, the other part remaining engulfed within the anus’ causing him to emit a ‘loud scream of pain and terror’ (p. 135). Too ashamed and afraid of ruining his reputation to go to the hospital, he shoots himself with a revolver rather than allowing himself to die slowing of an infection. The Spahi’s sexual desire leads him to abandon all
reason in an act that pleasurably, and then horrifyingly, destroys the boundary between the subject and object of desire—here, literally an inanimate object—and then destroys both altogether.

This same process occurs, albeit more subtly, in the ostensibly more romantic sexual encounters between the novel’s two main characters. When describing his first actually physical encounter with Teleny, Des Grieux describes that, ‘as my hands wandered over his head, his neck, his shoulders, his arms, I could not feel him at all; in fact, it seemed to me as if I were touching my own body’ (p. 89). While he experiences his first homosexual contact as if Teleny were an extension of his own corporeal self that erases the physical boundary between himself and the object of his desire, further sexual encounters erase the boundary between himself and Teleny as psychologically distinct entities. Later, after another sexual encounter, Des Grieux describes them as

unconscious of everything save the pleasure of feeling each other’s bodies, which, however, seemed to have lost their own individuality, mingled and confounded as they were together. Apparently we had but one head and one heart, for they beat in such unison, and the same vague thoughts flitted through both our brains. (p. 149)

These descriptions gesture towards a Platonic ideal of homosexual love the uniting of two separate beings into a single entity. Although the process of this merging might be violent, it results in the creation of a newly unified, wholly complete being.

Although Des Grieux presents this erasure of the boundary between subject and object as positive and enlightening, there is also a dark underside to this experience that comes through in his descriptions. Describing his orgasm while penetrating Teleny for the first time, Des Grieux declares,

I was melting away, but he never stopped till he had quite drained me of the last drop of life-giving fluid there was in me. My eyes were swimming in their sockets. I felt my heavy lids half close themselves; an unbearable voluptuousness of mingled
pain and pleasure, shattered my body and blasted my very soul;
then everything waned in me. He clasped me in his arms, and
I swooned away whilst he was kissing my cold and languid lips.
(p. 106)

The vampiric overtones of this passage are especially odd considering that Des Grieux is actually playing the ‘active’, penetrative role in this sexual encounter. However, his penetration of Teleny results in a passive ‘melting away’ and a ‘draining of life-giving fluid’ that makes him ‘swoon away’ as the victim of Teleny’s experienced sexual maneuverings. This paradoxical passivity is described in terms of Des Grieux’s ‘soul’ being ‘blasted’ and his ‘body’ being ‘shattered’, as if his orgasm caused him to lose the sense of his body as a discrete entity, which is experienced as a radical and nearly fatal loss of both physical and mental identity. Des Grieux describes another orgasm as leaving him ‘crushed and annihilated; then a pleasant state of torpor followed, and my eyes closed for a few seconds in happy oblivion’ (p. 116). Applying the rhetoric of shattering and blasting, crushing and annihilating to the post-orgasmic loss of proprioception partakes of the discourse of the sublime. Yet Des Grieux depicts his experience not as a desire for pleasure strong enough that it erases the confining boundary between the erotic subject and the erotic object. Instead, sex enacts the desire to destroy oneself by allowing it to be subsumed into the body and mind of another being.

Gay sex becomes an opportunity to engage in what Luckhurst has described as the ‘disorientation’ characteristic of the weird, which ‘inheres in perversity or transgression. It twists or veers away from familiar frames and binary distributions’. He quotes Bruno Latour to describe how weird disorientations create opportunities for ‘new entanglements that ‘have no clear boundaries, no well-defined essences, no sharp separation between their own hard kernel and the environment’. This makes weird fiction ‘a place for potentially radical disarticulations and reformulations of traditional binaries, starting with self and other, subject and object’. Far from being an apologia for homosexuality in the terms of the Foucauldian reverse discourse, the novel instead presents sex between men as an occasion for a disorienting experience of horror mingled with pleasure that ‘dethrones the subject’. However, this horror is not rooted in the ‘panic and disgust’ of homophobia and gay panic, but instead in the chaotic force of sex itself,
which always escapes attempts to discipline it, whether through the social controls of Victorian domestic ideology’s gender binary or the proliferating categories of sexual pathology created by the sexologists.38

Ultimately, the tragedy of Teleny is not, as some critics have maintained, that late-Victorian society had no place for healthy gay sex—in the universe of the novel, no sex is truly healthy. Rather, the novel represents all sexual acts as ‘passions full of rage and hatred’ that are inscribed in a discourse that forecloses the possibility of sexual liberation through the rights-based logic of liberalism. The novel’s very raison d’être as an explicitly pornographic text is to inscribe, in vividly grotesque terms, the destructive logic of sexuality itself, forcing readers to think beyond the binaries of man/woman, gay/straight that were hallmarks of Victorian social and scientific discourse. That a novel demonstrates this level of awareness at the supposed inaugural moment of modern homosexual identity should give historians of sexuality pause. Teleny invites us reimagine the history of sexuality not as a teleological movement away from the repressive hypothesis, but instead as a constantly reiterating investigation of desire’s inherent capacity for destruction.

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NOTES


Joseph Bristow, “‘A Few Drops of Thick, White, Viscid Sperm’: Teleny and the Defense of the Phallus’ in Porn Archives, ed. by Tim Dean, Steven Rusczycy, and David Squires (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), pp. 144–60 (p. 145). Bristow notes that the text asserts the robust health of the ‘man-loving penis’ in response to a ‘medicolegal establishment’ that sought to pathologize the male homosexual body (pp. 154, 158). I argue, however, that such moments often transform into the phallic sublimity that is one of the hallmarks of weird fiction’s disorienting effects.

Nelson, Publisher to the Decadents, p. 36.


Foucault, History of Sexuality, p. 43.


Lovecraft, Supernatural Horror, p. 15.


Ibid.


35 Christopher Wellings notes how in Teleny ‘women are treated throughout the text […] not [as] individuals, but archetypes of the female, defined solely in relation to male perceptions of their sexualities, or lack thereof’. While he is undoubtedly right to identify a thread of misogynistic disgust that runs throughout the text, I argue that the impulse to depersonalization characterizes every sexual encounter in the novel. Christopher Wellings, ‘Dangerous Desires: The Uses of Women in Teleny’, The Oscholars: Special Teleny Issue (2008, rev. 2017), http://www.oscholars.com/Teleny/wellings.htm.

