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Topology of the Closet

Michael Boucai, JD, MPhil 

State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo School of Law, Buffalo, New York, USA

ABSTRACT

Despite the closet's centrality to queer culture and theory, the metaphor's various meanings have yet to be disaggregated and defined. Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's identification of the closet with a "crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century," the present article uses an array of late-Victorian sources—especially *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds* and *Teleny*, a pornographic novel sometimes attributed to Oscar Wilde—to describe and distinguish: (1) so-called latent homosexuality ("the unconscious closet"); (2) deliberate strategies of suppression, abstention, and reformation ("the conscious closet"); (3) clandestine pursuits of gay sex and sociability ("the double life"); and (4) performances of a heterosexual persona ("the mask"). This article's sources further attest to the late-Victorian advent of "closet consciousness"—a recognition among certain homosexually-inclined men that the closet's multiple modalities, for all their variety, are phenomenologically and ideologically linked.

KEYWORDS

Closet; coming out; gender performativity; John Addington Symonds; male homosexuality; queer history; *Teleny*; Oscar Wilde

Introduction

Prosecutor: What is 'the love that dare not speak its name'?

Oscar Wilde: "The love that dare not speak its name' . . . is such a great affection . . . as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare. It is that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect. . . . It is in this century misunderstood, so much misunderstood that it may be described as the 'love that dare not speak its name,' and on account of it I am placed where I am now There is nothing unnatural about it That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.

(Loud applause, mingled with some hisses.)

Mr Justice Charles: If there is the slightest manifestation of feeling I shall have the Court cleared. There must be complete silence preserved. (Hyde, 1948, p. 236)

Oscar Wilde's defense of "the love that dare not speak its name" was delivered on April 30, 1895, from the dock of the Old Bailey, where he sat accused of

CONTACT Michael Boucai  mboucai@buffalo.edu  State University of New York (SUNY) at Buffalo School of Law, Buffalo, NY, USA.

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multiple counts of “gross indecency among men.” Although the precise phrase Wilde was asked to define appeared only five months earlier in a poem, “Two Loves,” by Lord Alfred Douglas, his twenty-four year-old paramour, the expression alluded unmistakably to same-sex sodomy’s ancient condemnation as “a very horrible vice which should not be named” (1376); an “abominable sin, amongst Christians not to be named” (1644); a “crime whose very mention is a disgrace to human nature” (1769); an offense “so detestable that the law of England blushes to name it” (1810); an act for which even a sympathetic commentator could “hardly find a name” that would “not soil th[e] paper” on which he wrote (1891) (Anonymous, 1813, p. 24; Blackstone, 1769, p. 215; Borris, 2003, p. 385; Coke, 1644/1986, p. 58; Douglas, 1894, p. 28; Symonds, 1891, p. 3). Lord Douglas’s twist on this tradition consisted in one subversive word: love.

Unspeakability was the prevailing discursive condition of homosexuality throughout the nineteenth century in Britain. In *Nameless Offenses* (2003), H.G. Cocks describes how an “injunction to silence,” promulgated by lawyers and judges who were professionally bound to transgress it, was received and reiterated in the wider world. Among journalists, “infamous” was probably the most common signifier for “sodomitical,” followed by words like “immoral,” “unnatural,” “improper,” “indecent,” “unrespectable,” and “disrespectable” (Cocks, 2003, pp. 85, 145; Cohen, 1993c, p. 20). When Lord Douglas’s father accused Wilde of “posing as a sodomite,” one newspaper literally left a blank (“----”) in place of his pose, while others spoke of “‘certain misdemeanors,’ ‘indecencies,’ . . . ‘immoral relationships,’ ‘improper relations,’ ‘certain practices,’ ‘certain matters,’ . . . ‘disgraceful charges,’ ‘gross misconduct,’ ‘gross immorality,’ ‘grave’ . . . [and] ‘terrible offenses,’ ‘wicked’ . . . [and] ‘unmentionable acts’” (Cohen, 1993b, pp. 144–145). As *The News of the World* put it, readers could be trusted “to understand what lies behind the lines” (White, 1999, pp. 59–60).

As a semiotic system, then, what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) called “the modern regime of the closet” was above all a regime of “the open secret” (pp. 164, 265; see also Miller, 1988). To that extent, Michel Foucault’s famous refutation of “the repressive hypothesis” may have no finer exemplar than Western culture’s ostensible reticence on the subject of homosexuality (Foucault, 1978/1990, pp. 15–49). But the closet isn’t only a discourse. The term denotes more than homosexuality’s simultaneous occlusion and representation in language. In everyday parlance, the metaphor usually refers to the subjective and social experiences of specific individuals. Whether employed as a noun (“the closet”), a verb (“to closet”), or an adjective (“closeted”), the word has given millions of people, speaking any number of languages, a way to narrate major arcs and minor incidents of their own and others’ lives (Koestenbaum, 1993, p. 62; Mangeot, 2003, p. 130). What has “the closet” meant to them? What personal and interpersonal conditions has it named?

Extending the closet metaphor's vivid spatial imagery, I engage these definitional questions in the guise of a topology: a "study of a particular place"; a description of "the way in which [its] constituent parts are interrelated or arranged" (Miller, 1995, p. 4; Topology, 2019). My method is genealogical, beginning with a "disaggregat[ion]" and "problematization" of an idea that "passes for 'given' in contemporary thought" (Foucault, 1975/1995, pp. 31, 33; Halperin, 2002b, pp. 13, 107). Drawing mainly on texts written between 1870 and 1910 by American, continental, and especially British authors, I survey the closet's multiple dimensions and show their convergence in the minds and lives of certain men of that period. My analysis begins with some late-Victorian ideas about homosexuality's etiology and an introduction to our two most important sources: a smutty novel called *Teleny* and the posthumously published autobiography of John Addington Symonds. I then proceed to examine, in turn, each of the closet metaphor's four main referents: (1) so-called latent homosexuality ("the unconscious closet"); (2) deliberate strategies of suppression, abstention, and reformation ("the conscious closet"); (3) clandestine pursuits of gay sex and sociability ("the double life"); and (4) performances—sometimes strained, sometimes second-nature—of a heterosexual persona ("the mask"). Observe the conceptual unity between these disparate ideas. Whether we describe the closet in terms of invisibility or inaudibility, repression or suppression, self-deception or duplicity, the core idea remains the same: absence—*coerced* absence. The closet discussed in these pages is anything but a gratuitous lie.

To my knowledge, this article is the first scholarly work, historical or otherwise, to disentangle and define each of the closet's several meanings. Such an undertaking, I realize, is bound to seem retardataire to readers familiar with Sedgwick's brilliant diagnosis in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) of Western culture's "chronic . . . crisis of homo/heterosexual definition, indicatively male, dating from the end of the nineteenth century" (p. 1). Despite Sedgwick's pointed temporal specificity, and despite prolific academic interest in *fin-de-siècle* sexualities, historians of the period have generally avoided the closet, both as a term of art and as a conceptual apparatus (cf. Cocks, 2003, pp. 1–13; Cohen, 1991; Cook, 2006, p. 202). For many Victorianists, no doubt, "the closet" is too glaringly anachronistic. As an unambiguous referent to concealed homosexuality, the expression may not have emerged before the mid-twentieth century,¹ and as such it gained mainstream currency only when gay liberationists of the Stonewall generation championed coming *out* of the closet as the key to individual and collective salvation (Altman, 1971; Dynes, 1990, p. 224; Jay & Young, 1972; Lazerson, 1981, p. 274).

In a rare discussion of the closet metaphor's historiographical propriety, George Chauncey (1995) dismisses objections based purely on linguistic anachronism: "The fact that gay people in the past did not speak of . . . themselves as living in a closet does not preclude us from using the term retrospectively as an analytic category" (p. 6). Even so, his pioneering work eschews the term. The

men who populate *Gay New York* “described negotiating their presence in an often hostile world as living a double life, or wearing a mask and taking it off”—images, says Chauncey, that evoke not the “isolation” and “self-hatred” of the closet, but “gay men’s ability” to construct multiple selves, inhabit a variety of social *milieux*, and mount “strategies of everyday resistance” (pp. 4–6). The problem with this explanation isn’t simply that, for at least half a century, the closet metaphor has named, quite precisely, the discrepancies between an individual’s gay and straight personae.² More importantly, those very discrepancies have wrought misery and solitude no less than they’ve facilitated the “happy, self-confident, and loving” existences that Chauncey’s book showcases.

Like many chronicles of the queer past, *Gay New York* dwells mainly on homosexual subcultures, communities, and networks—domains in which human agency, “courage,” “dignity,” and “resilience” are readily perceptible (pp. 4, 174, 249, 317, 328). Stories that highlight such agreeable themes are stories that antihomophobic scholars are understandably eager to tell; and tell them we should, but not to the exclusion of gloomier narratives that, often enough, involve exactly the same characters. Many men with strong homosexual desires never or only rarely made it into the stalls of the public *pissoir*, let alone the shadows of the pre-Stonewall gay bar. Many such men never or only rarely dropped their masks, and some scarcely knew they were wearing one. In the course of a single lifetime, moreover, such a man would have occupied (as so many of us still occupy) multiple intersections along the axes of self-loathing and self-acceptance, sexual deprivation and sexual indulgence, normative and queer sociability. Indeed, such a man might have shifted his position along these axes multiple times in a single day. The metaphor of the closet is capacious enough to accommodate all of these experiences: enabling disguises, secrets, seclusions, and subcultures, but also, as we shall see, repressed desires, earnest renunciations, desperate conversions, and—when all else failed—the revolver, the noose, and the parapet.

“Congenital” homosexuals: Sexology, Teleny, and *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds*

The rule of sodomy’s unspeakability structured “a whole rhetoric of allusion and metaphor”—not only for the discourses of judge and journalist, but also for the burst of homosexual self-expression that marks the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Foucault, 1978/1990, p. 17).³ Enabling in equally complex ways were the scientific and therapeutic motives that were then serving to justify more direct speech on “homosexuality,” a word coined in German by Karl-Maria Kertbeny in 1869, first used in English in the 1892 translation of Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and soon “widely used” among sex researchers like Havelock Ellis (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, p. 96; Herzer, 1985–1986; von Krafft-ebing, 1892, pp. 97, 187, et passim).

Quite unintentionally, the new sexological lexicon fostered in certain readers a protean sense of identity and emboldened some of them to give written vent to their quintessentially taboo feelings (Cook, 2006, p. 197). In doing so, these authors tended overwhelmingly to continue the centuries-long tradition of signifying homoeroticism through “circumlocutions, insinuations and clusters of suggestive associations” (Young, 2000, p. 39).

Lord Alfred Douglas’s poem, “Two Loves,” with its instantly recognizable allusion to the “crime not fit to be named” (Blackstone, 1769, p. 216), was a bold defiance of the usual rules of connotation and obfuscation. Indeed, the poem’s self-evidence is exactly what forced Wilde, facing the prospect of two years hard labor, to propound an alternative, highly spiritualized take on “the love that dare not speak its name.” The appropriately paradoxical result of this evasion was Wilde’s most forthright public defense of homosexuality. Or was it?

Teleny, or the Reverse of the Medal (1893) is an anonymous, pornographic novel set in Paris, printed in London, and widely but controversially attributed to a group of men that may have included Wilde.⁴ A highly esoteric work, *Teleny*’s paramount metaphor is announced in its title; the Greek verb “τελεῖν”—*telein*—means “to initiate into the mysteries” (Burkert, 1987, p. 9; Liddell & Scott, 1996, p. 1772).⁵ Borrowing words and imagery from the *Phaedrus* and the *Symposium*, Platonic dialogues that represent love as a mystical initiation, *Teleny* traces the erotic career of a twenty-two year-old bourgeois named Camille Des Grieux (Plato, 1871/1952, pp. 517–528, 585–585, 587–590). The novel relates Camille’s childhood “infatuation” with “a young Hercules of a butcher,” the fumbling heterosexual experimentations of his adolescence, and eventually the fulfillment of his “essential . . . being” in a torrid romance with René Teleny, a Hungarian pianist two years older than Camille (*Teleny*, pp. 11, 57). Note that word “essential.” René initiates Camille into homosexual practice, not homosexual inclination or identity. “I was born a sodomite,” he declares (p. 70).

Teleny contains more than the quantum of social “observation” that Stephen Marcus deemed “flimsy support” for pornography’s historical “utility” (1964, p. 46). Whereas Marcus maintained that pornography “registers” social forces more “crudely than . . . almost any other form of written expression,” *Teleny*’s narrator is intensely alert to the inhospitable circumstances in which he—and, one presumes, his creators—were situated (p. 45).⁶ With a palpable sense of their modernity (the novel is styled “a physiological romance of to-day [sic]”), *Teleny*’s authors recognized pornography’s capacity to relate experiences, not only sexual ones, that were denied explicit and sympathetic depiction in other genres (Dean, 2014, pp. 5, 10; Upchurch, 2009, p. 191). Anonymous, fictional, and unapologetically obscene, this particular mode of expression was uniquely qualified to admit otherwise unpublishable speech and to document cultural and psychological terrains that otherwise went uncharted, including the “defining structure of gay oppression in our time”: the closet (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 71).

None of the closet's respective meanings, not even latent homosexuality, depends on a particular etiological theory of sexual orientation. Still, it's no accident that the innate homosexuality Camille Des Grieux claims for himself in *Teleny* was equally asserted by our second major protagonist, John Addington Symonds (1840–1893), the author of several volumes of poetry and many critical works of remarkable erudition. Among Symonds's achievements were *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873), *Renaissance in Italy* (appearing in seven volumes between 1875 and 1886), the first English-language translation of *The Sonnets of Michael Angelo Buonarroti* (1878), *A Problem in Greek Ethics* (1883), *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891), and, posthumously, *Sexual Inversion* (1897), coauthored entirely by mail with the sexologist Havelock Ellis. As the progress of these titles suggests, some of Symonds's most notable achievements were sublimations and eventually outright affirmations of a profoundly personal interest in homosexuality (Holliday, 2000, p. 85).

Even if he had never bothered to pen a tell-all autobiography, Symonds probably still would be remembered as an exemplar of the biographical contradictions and intellectual preoccupations of the bourgeois Victorian homosexual (Crozier, 2008, p. 5). But *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds*, completed in 1891 and first published nearly a century later, stands with *Teleny* among the few late-Victorian texts that frankly render, from a non-pathologizing standpoint, a homosexual man's psychological and social journey from childhood to middle age. In vastly different registers but with numerous points of narrative affinity, both *Teleny* and Symonds's *Memoirs* frankly “put on record the facts and phases” of their heroes' “aberrant inclination” (Symonds, 1984, p. 182).

Symonds, again, was no less certain than Camille that “the uncontrollable bias,” the “paramount and permanent craving of [his] physical and psychical nature,” was “congenital” (Symonds, 1984, pp. 188, 190, 202). His life, he said, was “perplexed from first to last by [a] passion—natural, instinctive, healthy in his own particular case—but morbid and abominable from the point of view of . . . society” (1984, p. 183). An essentialist premise was foundational to Symonds's argument in *A Problem in Modern Ethics* that homosexual acts, being expressions of immutably homosexual “inborn instincts,” should be decriminalized in Britain (Symonds, 1891, pp. 132–133, 1984, p. 99). Similarly, in *Homogenic Love in a Free Society*, Edward Carpenter (1895/1980) called it an “established . . . fact, known hitherto only to individuals, that sexual inversion . . . is in a vast majority of cases quite instinctive and . . . practically ineradicable” (p. 11). The biographical vignettes collected in *Sexual Inversion*, the first scientific work on homosexuality based mainly on British subjects, are typical. Case III showed “no evidence whatever of the normal instinct at any period of life”; his homosexuality was evidently “congenital.” Case V, “without any incitement of an external kind, . . . felt this instinct form and gain strength within him.” Case VI stated that his “sexual feelings . . . disclosed themselves perfectly naturally and spontaneously within me.” Case IX, who despised “his sexual inclinations,” nevertheless considered them “perfectly

natural” to himself (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, pp. 130, 131, 133, 135, 136). And so on. These men’s belief in the innateness of their homosexuality underscores the potency and seeming permanence of the yearnings they were expected to hide from the world—or, better still, from themselves.

The unconscious closet: latent homosexuality

Yes, there had been things in his boyhood that he had not understood. He understood them now.

—Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

Reflecting on the Wilde trials’ social effects, Havelock Ellis (1900/2007) drew a distinction between homosexual contagion and homosexual self-consciousness. Although the scandal’s “universal publicity” could “scarcely have sufficed to increase . . . the proportion of invert[s] among the general population,” Ellis harbored “no doubt” that the trials were enlightening “to many . . . who were before only vaguely conscious of their abnormality” (pp. 48–49). Some invert[s], however, remained clueless. One of Ellis’s own informants, a man whose obsessive interest in the scandal had led him to purchase and pore over numerous photographs of Wilde, avowed that press coverage of the spectacle “flashed upon me no light of self-revelation [I]f my interest . . . arose from any other emotion than the . . . morbid curiosity then universal, I was not conscious of it” (p. 168).

“Latent homosexuality,” a term “used interchangeably with unconscious homosexuality,” has been a persistent theme in clinical, biographical, and autobiographical accounts of same-sex attraction (Campbell, 2009, p. 463; Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, p. 124; West, 1969, pp. 207–209). Logically, the closet of latent homosexuality can be discerned only from the outside—either by onlookers peering in or by oneself after quitting it (Chekola, 1994, p. 70). Symonds’s *Memoirs* assume the latter perspective, as when the author credits his first readings of Plato with “unseal[ing] . . . the fountains of my hidden consciousness” (1984, pp. 66–83; Symonds, 2016, pp. 114, 128; see also Cohen, 1993a, p. 359). In *Telony* we find both perspectives. Soon after embarking on his affair with René, Camille learns of a coterie of men who long suspected him of being, in their words, “one of us” (*Telony*, 1893/1986, p. 141). These gossips, Camille concedes, detected something in him he hadn’t recognized in himself: “The exile knows what his cravings are but I did not” (p. 46). Later he muses that “a man’s passions[,] . . . though smouldering in a latent state, . . . are in his bosom all the same” (p. 70). The point is reinforced when Camille frets to René that, “had it not been for me, you might have loved some woman whom you could have married,” to which René replies: “And have found out, but too late, that I was born with other cravings. No, sooner or later, I should have followed my destiny” (p. 172).

It would be naïve to believe that every (if not any) first-person account of the unconscious closet is an accurate description of psychological reality. Often, what's initially recalled as perfectly opaque repression looks on closer inspection more like a minutely contrived self-evasion. Here, too, Camille's case is exemplary. "Who had planted nettles in my garden?" he asks rhetorically. "Not I. They had grown there unawares, from my very childhood. I began to feel their carnal stings long before I could understand what conclusions they imparted" (*Teleny*, 1893/1986, p. 130). In a more graphic register he confides that his "greatest delight" as a boy "was to see men bathing A phallus acted upon me, as—I suppose—it does upon a very hot woman; my mouth actually watered at its sight" (p. 58). "Withal," he says, "I never understood that I loved men and not women I was unconscious that this was love" (p. 57).⁷

Noting the "resistance" that manifests as an analysis and nears awareness of his repressed desire, Jean-Paul Sartre suggested that the supposedly "repressed" drive of Freudian psychology is really a matter of bad faith, existing not in some opaque and submerged psychic realm but within a consciousness that knows exactly what that desire is "*precisely in order not to be conscious of it*" (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 53). This existentialist modification of psychoanalytic theory suggests one way—surely not the only way—to interpret the equivocation that runs through Camille Des Grieux's account of the long stretch of years in which he "knew absolutely nothing" of his "sensual disposition" while still, on some level, feeling them quite keenly (p. 58).⁸ It helps us to reconcile Camille's admission, equally redolent of passivity and agency, that "*without knowing it, I always struggled* [emphases added] against the inclinations of my nature" (p. 51). In other words, Sartre's critique permits us to place the unconscious closet in more active relationship to the manifestations of the conscious closet described just below: suppression, or the Sisyphean work of purposefully quelling homosexual desire; abstention, or the refusal to carnally act upon that desire; and reformation, or the effort to supplement or, if possible, replace homosexual with heterosexual desire.

The conscious closet: suppression, abstention, and reformation

To strangle whatever nature is in me; neither to love nor to be loved, . . . till the end is come.

—Oscar Wilde, *Vera, or the Nihilists*

In *Teleny*, Camille pursues suppression, abstention, and reformation more or less simultaneously. While he "struggles hard to crush" and "stifle" and "argue down" his "natural feelings" for René, he resolves to test anew the heterosexual waters he'd dutifully tried to swim as an adolescent (*Teleny*, 1893/1986, pp. 43, 51, 70, 130). Camille sets his sights on Catherine, a pretty maid in his own household. Unlike every other man he knows, including his "strong

and sinewy” coachman, Camille feels not “the slightest attraction” for the girl (pp. 87, 96). Twice he has the opportunity to “deflower” her and twice he stops short of doing so, provoking his jealous coachman to complete the deed himself (pp. 91, 93, 95): “If that *bougre* can use you for his pleasure, so shall I” (p. 97). Catherine reacts to the assault by jumping to her death from a window (p. 99). “I had really tried to love her,” reflects Camille (p. 101). Only now, in the wake of a young woman’s rape and suicide, does he see that it’s “useless to mince matters any longer, or to give myself the lie” (p. 102).

Camille’s sojourn in the conscious closet is uncommonly brief, spanning the few months between his initial encounter with René and their first kiss—“a criminal kiss long withstood and fought against” (p. 114). John Addington Symonds, by contrast, passed much of his life actively resisting his illicit desires. Although he wrote in 1869, almost at age thirty, “I carry in my heart what I am afraid to analyse—even to define—what I hardly acknowledge to myself,” his *Memoirs* reveal that even as a child he perceived “spontaneous yearnings deeply seated in my nature” (Symonds, 1984, pp. 77, 196). By age 15, “a homosexual diathesis had become established,” at which point Symonds apprehended his “temperament” just as Camille did at twenty-two—as an affliction “from which no exit seemed possible, except in suicide or what I then considered sin” (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, p. 144; Symonds, 1984, pp. 121, 185). “Through fear and shame,” he struggled to “suppress and overcome” his “unconquerable yearnings” (Symonds, 1891, p. 13; 1984, pp. 127, 152). “Driven in upon by ungratified desires,” he stifled his homosexuality “so far as outward action went,” until—thirteen years into his marriage, at thirty-six years old—he had a pleasant assignation with a sailor in a London brothel (1984, pp. 128, 182, 253–54).

In a letter to Krafft-Ebing, reprinted in *A Problem in Modern Ethics*, Symonds universalized his experience in the person of an unnamed “Urning” (Karl Heinrich Ulrichs’s word for homosexual) (Ulrichs (1864–1879/1994)). This figure, Symonds’s homosexual Everyman, first feels “sexual stirrings” in “the years of boyhood” (Symonds, 1891, p. 69). When he reveals those feelings to a teacher or parent, he “is exhorted at any cost to overcome and trample” them (Symonds, 1891, p. 69; see also Cohen, 2013, p. 159). Normally whispered behind closed doors, such advice had a rare public airing when Jerome K. Jerome editorialized in 1894 against the audacious Oxford magazine—tellingly titled *The Chameleon*—that had recently elegized “the love that dare not speak its name” (Douglas, 1894, p. 28). According to Jerome, “young men . . . cursed with . . . unnatural cravings” had no choice but “to wrestle with the devil within them” (d’Arch Smith, 1970, p. 58). Echoing Symonds’s description of one “who bends and sweats beneath a burden heavy enough to drag him down,” Jerome attested that “many a long and agonized struggle is fought, unseen and unknown, within the heart of a young man” (d’Arch Smith, 1970, p. 58; Symonds, 1984, p. 182). Older men also strained and smarted. At age sixty, an informant for *Sexual Inversion* still could not “decide . . . how far” he should hold

himself “accountable for instincts and feelings from which no prayers, no struggle, can deliver me” (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, p. 131).

Some men, to quote one of Ellis’s case studies, “would do anything not to be an Urning” (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, p. 138). Treatments included “religion,” “hygiene,” “hypnotism,” “drugs,” “electrical stimulation of the brain and the spinal cord,” “cauterization of the urethra,” and “castration” (Lind, 1918, pp. 73–74; Symonds, 1984, p. 151). To anyone in whom heterosexual “inclination” was “not absolutely wanting,” even a relatively enlightened physician like Krafft-Ebing recommended “avoiding and opposing all homo-sexual [sic] feelings and impulses” (1892, p. 236). Where that optimal solution was unavailable or unattainable, one could (in theory) at least refrain from acting on one’s desires. Some men succeeded in that second-best approach; many others tried and failed (Goldhill, 2016, p. 215). Hence the “note of . . . forced abstention” that Symonds (1984) claimed to have “never found . . . absent in lovers of my sort . . . , unless the men have cast prudence to the winds” (p. 109). Hence, too, Case VI’s admission in *Sexual Inversion* that, in the long years before he began to gratify his “imperious need,” he lived “on the brink of despair and madness with repressed passion and torment” (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, p. 132).

Contrary to “the common belief” that all homosexuals had “willfully turned their appetites” away from women, many men steered themselves, wishfully but resolutely, in just that direction (Symonds, 1891, pp. 10–11). Like the adolescent Camille in *Teleny*, Case XVII in *Sexual Inversion* had “tried to make [him]self believe” he was in love with various females. Case XVIII had “felt . . . he must conquer himself by efforts of will, . . . by a persistent direction of his thoughts to heterosexual images,” and by “coaxing up a romantic affection” that “came to nothing, probably because the girl felt the absolute want of passion in his wooing” (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, pp. 142, 145).

In *A Problem in Modern Ethics* (1891), Symonds counted twenty men in Ulrichs’s studies who resorted to what he elsewhere called “the brothel cure,” “forc[ing] themselves to frequent public women soon after the age of puberty” (pp. 97–98; Symonds, 1984, p. 152; 1891). A more drastic but no less common approach, which some doctors shamelessly recommended alongside the brothel cure, was “the experiment of marriage” (Hartland, 1985/1901, pp. 66–67; Symonds, 1984, p. 171). Whether pursued on the groom’s own initiative or under pressure from a physician or parent, forced marches to the altar predictably resulted in a substantial population of husbands who rendered the marital debt only with great “difficulty, or by means of evoking the images of men on whom their affections were set” (Symonds, 1891, pp. 97–98; see also Carpenter, 1895/1980, p. 12; von Krafft-ebing, 1892, p. 256). For his own part, Symonds came to believe that, “being what I am, the great mistake—perhaps the great crime of my life, was my marriage” (1984, p. 184).

Oscar Wilde wrote that “reformation is a much more painful process than punishment, is indeed punishment in its most aggravated . . . form” (Wilde,

1890/1891, p. 164). The line movingly suggests why incarceration offered such an apt metaphor for men's "torment," their "agonies," the "nightmare" of their lives, "the bitter anguish" of countless years, how they "tortured" themselves, how they "suffered" (Carpenter, 1895/1980, pp. 17–18; 1909, pp. 24, 149; Hartland, 1985/1901, p. 73; *Teleny*, 1893/1984, pp. 12, 71). An 1869 prose poem by Simeon Solomon describes a "love imprisoned in an alien land of oblivion" (Reade, 1970, p. 134). In "A Letter," composed in 1886, Digby Mackworth Dolben gave pained expression to "the life imprisoned in [his] brain" (1911, p. 34). "Held in Bondage" was the title John Gambril Nicholson affixed to his 1892 sonnet about a love "of which you will not, and I dare not speak" (d'Arch Smith, 1970, p. 5). And later, in *The Intermediate Sex*, Edward Carpenter (1909) wrote of a man whose youth was a "bondage" of which he gradually grew "acutely conscious" (p. 149).

Case V in *Sexual Inversion* speculated that, "if all the miserable hours of my wretchedness and despair could be counted up which I have suffered in my life, they would form a hell" (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, p. 131). This reference to the underworld partakes of another discourse that men used to describe the trials and traumas of the conscious closet. "Yours was not an ill for mending," wrote Alfred Housman in *A Shropshire Lad* (1986/1990); "'twas best to take it to the grave" (p. 31). An 1892 poem by Lionel Johnson personifies same-sex desire as an uninvited companion whom he "cannot cease to hate," an appendage from which his body—"nameless" and "lifeless" and "hiding its dead soul"—cannot break free (1982, p. 74). An 1890 letter to Symonds from Edmond Gosse, a fellow critic and poet, is yet more ghoulish. Answering his friend's disclosure of a "long struggle between varied forms of inclinations and abstentions," Gosse wrote: "I know all that you speak of—the solitude, the rebellion, the despair The position of a young man so tormented is really that of a man buried alive and conscious, but deprived of speech. He is doomed by his own timidity and ignorance to a repression which amounts to death" (Symonds, 1969, p. 448; Thwaite, 2007, p. 204).

Morbid stuff indeed. When we consider how many men ultimately chose suicide over the figurative death of self-negation, Gosse's macabre letter takes on an even darker cast. As Gosse himself wrote many years later, "they learn that they are not as others are, till some go mad and some sink prone to earth" (Gosse, 1911, p. 265). Symonds likewise had "contemplated suicide" on more than one occasion, the "quarrel" between "the glass of truth" and "the mirror of convention" nearly driving him "into blowing his brains out, or into idiocy" (1984, pp. 121, 173, 283; see also Lind, 1918, pp. 104–106, 113).

In *Teleny*, too, Camille experiences the conscious closet as perilous territory, crisscrossed by "Stygian waters" that twice lure him to their fatal banks. At the novel's climax, when Camille stands ready to throw himself into the river, he pleads with René: "Do not tempt me beyond my strength; let me rather die." In this moment of deepest despair, Camille sees suicide not merely as an act of will but as the ultimate assertion of willpower. He perceives less weakness in

“self-slaughter” than in yielding to the homosexuality that René embodies. Camille’s “heinous sin,” committed “morally, if not materially, . . . could only be overcome by another. In my case, suicide was not only allowable, but laudable—nay, heroic” (1893/1986, pp. 109–110).

The double life: subculture, secrecy, and exposure

Do you really think . . . that it is weakness that yields to temptation? I tell you that there are terrible temptations that it requires strength, strength and courage, to yield to.

—Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*

It’s a sign of the closet metaphor’s dominance in post-Stonewall conceptualizations of homosexuality that the phrase “coming out” is irrevocably yoked to it. This was not always the case. Today one comes out *of* the closet, but the phrase originally referred to another kind of initiatory experience: coming out, like a debutante, *into* gay subculture. Later, gay people were also said to “come out” *by* or *through* a first sexual encounter (Chauncey, 1995, p. 7). *Teleny* reflects these now-outdated meanings; in both name and deed, its title character personifies induction into the adjacent realms of love and community.

Camille’s experience in *Teleny* faithfully tracks the pattern sketched for Symonds’s homosexual Everyman, who, having recognized himself as an “Urning, . . . find[s] upon his path in life a soul who feels the same as he does, or else [is] introduced by some initiated friend into the circles of the Urning-world.” There he learns “that he is by no means the only individual . . . who harbours these abnormal emotions; he opens his eyes, and marvels to discover how numerous are his comrades in all social spheres” (Symonds, 1891, p. 71). In *Teleny*, Camille follows René into the sodomite’s shadowy urban underworld only days after their sexual relationship begins. An orgy, styled a “symposium,” launches him into a community of men who “were—like myself—sodomists” (*Teleny*, 1893/1986, pp. 141, 153, 160). Case studies in *Sexual Inversion* and *Psychopathia Sexualis* broadly confirm the prevalence of this initiatory trajectory (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, p. 132; von Krafft-ebing, 1892, p. 272).

To be sure, not all men who pursued homosexual contacts—perhaps only a minority of them—participated in anything resembling a queer “community.” Secrecy, not sociability, was the defining aspect of the double life, that “*modus vivendi*” of anyone who broke away, however briefly, from the prescribed regimen of suppression, abstention, and reformation (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, p. 198). “Under the prevalent laws and hostilities of modern society,” explained Symonds, “the inverted passion has to be indulged furtively” (1891, p. 13). The double life was a matter of drawn curtains, covered tracks, burnt and hidden letters, payments to blackmailers, petty and not-so-petty alibis; of “married men” who ran “awful risks” in their pursuit of gay sex; and of private, invitation-only gatherings of what

Camille and René called “men like ourselves” (Saul, 1881/2006, p. 22; *Teleny*, 1893/1986, p. 28).

Bourgeois, middle-class, and working-class ideals of masculinity all championed, in their respective ways, the importance of being earnest. An ideal husband, as the ideal man *tout court*, was supposed to be a paragon of honor, honesty, and transparency—virtues obviously inaccessible to homosexually active men in multiple and important parts of their existence (Vance, 1975, 1985). Thus were many men “injured in their character and health by the debasing influences of furtive” and “spasmodic” liaisons (Symonds, 1891, p. 13, 1984, pp. 182–183). In *The Intermediate Sex* (1909), Carpenter recounted the plight of a young man of exemplary character, known to “hate lies of all kinds,” who was “tormented” by “hav[ing] to conceal everything” (p. 149). Case XXV in *Sexual Inversion* lamented that his “chief regret in connection with his homosexual instincts” was being “obliged to lead a double life” (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, p. 157). Of his own “deceit” in carrying on “clandestine” intimacies, Symonds said simply, it “brought me cruel wrong” (1984, p. 117). His deep sense of guilt surfaced movingly in a letter congratulating Robert Louis Stevenson on his gothic tale, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*: “It has left such a deeply painful impression on my heart that I do not know how I am ever to turn to it again. Viewed as an allegory, it touches upon one too closely” (Symonds, 1969, pp. 120–21).

Whatever “added charm” secrecy might have sometimes lent the pursuit of sex, such “clandestine games” were normally fraught with fear (Saul, 1881/2006, p. 7; Symonds, 1984, p. 106). Likewise was “genuine love” marred by the practices, worries, and panics of concealment (p. 84). Some men found that long-term romance, if not entirely foreclosed, necessitated even greater and more painful restraints (Upchurch, 2009, p. 65).⁹ “Suspicious of my simplest acts I grow; I doubt my passing words, however brief,” wrote J.G. Nicholson in 1896, recalling Francis William Bourdillon’s complaint four years earlier that lovers’ “lips must say not” and “eyes betray not” the “heart’s hid treasure” (Reade, 1970, pp. 303–304; White, 1999, p. 248). These poetic accounts chime with the experience of Symonds’s homosexual Everyman:

[T]he very commencement of the relation sets a whole chain . . . in motion: and the dread lest the secret should be betrayed or divined, prevents the unfortunate lover[s] from ever arriving at a simple happiness. Both . . . are continually forced to hide their liaison; their anxiety on this point is incessant . . . Trifling circumstances, which would have no importance for another sort of man, make him tremble. (1891, p. 71)

Though never oblivious to the riskiness of his affair with René, nor indifferent to the “distasteful slander and gossip” it eventually provoked, Camille Des Grieux is seen to “tremble” only once in *Teleny*, and that is when he receives an unsigned blackmail note. Even René, otherwise “inured to such matters,” goes pale when he reads the “horrible, infamous, anonymous threat” (*Teleny*, 1893/1986, pp. 132–133, 188, 191). Blackmail likewise pervades the

plot of *Sins of the Cities of the Plain*, a lewd novel based loosely on the Cleveland Street Scandal of 1889, whose complicated origins were mired in extortion (Hyde, 1976; Saul, 1881/2006; Simpson, Chester, & Leitch, 1977). The book's narrator and several lesser characters are prostitutes, endowed with "particular specialties for turning . . . vice to account." One of them boasts that "[t]here's nothing like bleeding . . . these old fellas, and young ones are better still—they are so easily frightened" (Saul, 1881/2006, pp. 86, 103).

Throughout the nineteenth century, blackmail was a constant danger in the lives of homosexually active men. At one point it had become so widespread that street slang dubbed it "the common bounce" (Cocks, 2003, p. 115). A species of larceny, blackmail was illegal throughout the Victorian age, and there was a period—alas, before Wilde's trials—when a defendant's payments to blackmailers were inadmissible as evidence of the charged offense (Cocks, 2003, p. 126; Hyde, 1948, pp. 197, 202–204, 238, 241–242, 295, 307, 320, 326). As Symonds, Carpenter, and others regularly asserted, however, the criminal law's prohibition of homosexual conduct actually subsidized a market in bribery (Carpenter, 1909, pp. 79, 165; Cocks, 2003, pp. 115–155; Mayne, 1908, pp. 455–495; McLaren, 2002, p. 16; Symonds, 1891, pp. 22, 72–73, 134–135). The Labouchère Amendment of 1885, which codified the nebulous crime of "gross indecency," was nicknamed the "Blackmailer's Charter," and Wilde's lawyer branded it "an act of indemnity" for extortionists (Hyde, 1948, p. 89).

Public imputation of homosexuality was inherently damaging to reputation—defamation *per se*; and blackmail was epidemic partly because that damage was done regardless of whether one ultimately succeeded in a prosecution for defamation. It hardly mattered that, in a reversal of the usual rules of criminal procedure, defendants charged with libel or slander bore the burden of establishing the truth of their disparaging statements (Keeton, 1976, p. 1222; Johnson, 2016, pp. 22–25). Victory at law didn't magically dispel the cloud over a man's head. Speaking of blackmailers' necessary advantage over their victims, one (mostly heterosexual) writer asked: "Suppose I catch them and prosecute them; suppose they set the maximum penalty [D]oes that convince my jealous wife? Does that prevent people in the street from pointing me out as 'the man who was mixed up in that buggery business?'" (Crowley, 1910/1991, p. 32).

If the blackmailer, the yellow journalist, the outraged citizen, the begrudged neighbor, and the jealous lover couldn't sentence men to prison, they threatened a mode of enforcement that many individuals found no less terrifying: exposure—a fate that, in *Teleny*, Camille at first considers literally worse than death (1893/1986, pp. 132–33). He wasn't the only one (McLaren, 2002, p. 18). Suggesting "a partial clue" as to why "so many . . . mysterious disappearances are . . . mentioned in the papers," *Sins of the Cities of the Plain* recounts a tale of two blackmailers who persisted so greedily that "at last" their victim "blew his brains out" (Saul, 1881/2006, p. 97). One of the imagined endings to Symonds's *Everyman* story leads to a similar result. In this version, the

“miserable wretch” falls “into the hands of some pretty fellow” who turns on a dime from lover to extortionist. Faced with a choice between “paying money down or . . . becoming socially impossible,” the Everyman “pays, and still the more he pays, . . . until at last there lies nothing else before him except total financial ruin or disgrace.” Emphasizing the pervasiveness of such double binds, Symonds wonders aloud “[h]ow many unexplained cases of suicide in young men ought to be ascribed to this cause!” His own best guess: “At least half” (1891, pp. 72–73).

“I thought . . . men like that shot themselves.” That’s what King George V allegedly replied when informed of a nobleman whose homosexuality was likely to be revealed in the course of a divorce (Hyde, 1970, p. 197). However callous, the remark contained more than a grain of truth. “People like that” were goaded to suicide by both internal and external pressures, and we must wonder how many men who chose death over disrepute were fulfilling a destiny that they, like Symonds, had “contemplated” many times already, before any immediate threat of exposure (Symonds, 1984, p. 173).

The mask: engendering heterosexuality

Afraid every moment lest the mask should be stripped from one’s face, and all the while to hear the laughter, the horrible laughter of the world.

—Oscar Wilde, *Lady Windermere’s Fan*

The double life and the mask are often mentioned in the same breath (Chauncey, 1995, p. 6; Pallone, 1990). While the terms’ frequent juxtaposition attests to their conceptual proximity, it also implies a distinction. To put it crudely, deception about what one does is different from deception about who one is. No doubt the two ruses will overlap substantially whenever an identity, condition, or disposition may be inferred (rightly or wrongly) from acts. Thus it would be plausible to construe most if not all tricks of the double life as so many incarnations of a heterosexual masquerade. But we should be careful not to collapse the two concepts. The metaphor of the mask, evoking a “distinction in [one’s] character between an inner and real self and an outer and artificial self,” incorporates phenomena that the double life does not—attributes like demeanor, dress, voice, and vocabulary (Symonds, 1984, p. 95). It allows us, for example, to account for Case 114 in *Psychopathia Sexualis*, a man who was perfectly chaste in all his dealings with other men, who never insinuated (much less confessed) his homosexuality to anyone other than Krafft-Ebing himself, but who nonetheless felt “the constant fear of having this peculiarity recognized, and of being cast from society.” (von Krafft-Ebing, 1892, p. 269). In the absence of any objectively incriminating evidence, what could give away this man’s secret? Another of Kraft-Ebing’s subjects points to the answer. Case

121 reported: “I am able to behave myself in such a masculine way that, in [the homosexual] circles to which I have been introduced . . . , there is a doubt as to my genuineness” (p. 274).

If the mask of heterosexuality has changed since Wilde’s time, the differences are in the details. Then as now, it obeys the same deceptively plain imperative: act like a man (Smith, Kippax, & Chapple, 1998, p. 56; Trumbach, 1989, 1998). The logic of this command, which even today circulates as common sense, was bolstered in the late nineteenth century by the then-dominant scientific theory of homosexuality. Following a logic of strict gender differentiation that had developed over centuries (Laqueur, 1990), the diagnosis of “sexual inversion” interpreted a male person’s attraction to other men as a sign of incongruity between outward and inward sex (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008). On this view, markers of femininity in men weren’t just portents of an erotic disposition contrary to natural order; they were disclosures of an inner gender contrary to physiological sex and social identity. These inferences reflected a common set of assumptions, historically specific but hardly novel (*Plain Reasons for the Growth of Sodomy in England, 1728*, Chap. 2; Sinfield, 1994; Trumbach, 1989, 1998).

Admitting that “a certain class of [homosexuals] are undoubtedly feminine,” Symonds (1891) called it “a gross mistake to suppose that all the tribe” are “pale, languid, scented, [and] effeminate.” Actually, he wrote, “the majority differ in no detail of . . . outward appearance, . . . physique, or . . . dress from normal men. They are athletic, masculine in habits, frank in manner, passing through society year after year without arousing a suspicion of their inner temperament” (pp. 14–15). Nothing in this description suggests a calculated effort to pass, but among Symonds’s straight-acting majority there certainly were men who “often act[ed] deliberately . . . to lead the world astray” (Carpenter, 1909, p. 20). If some of their strategies seem silly or trivial when considered individually—smoking cigars, for example, in order to “show [one]self to the world in the fashions of a man” (Robb, 2003, p. 48)—a passage from Edward Prime Stevenson’s pseudonymously published *The Intersexes* (1909) reveals the potential toll of a social persona established and reestablished by means of constant dissimulation:

‘Why am I? What am I? . . . Able to keep my character and sex as a man before the world and yet with this sexual nature of a woman in me Am I sick, mad?’ So cries some ‘inborn’ Uranian, bewildered and wretched, when he is alone and can throw down the Mask. (Mayne, 1908, p. 88)

To be clear, the mask of heterosexuality was more than a matter of gendered style and comportment. Take marriage, presented earlier as an especially drastic means of reformation, a renunciation of homosexual desire in favor of heterosexual praxis. Sometimes, actually, the decision to wed was more

cynical than delusional. In *Lady Windermere's Fan* (Wilde, 1892/1908/1966), a woman is warned not to tolerate her husband's infidelity: "You would have to be to him the mask of his real life, the cloak to hide his secret" (p. 403). That's exactly (if not exclusively) what a wife was for men whose secret life was homosexual: a prop, a decoy, an alibi (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, pp. 136, 149; Upchurch, 2000, p. 148; Skolsky, 1944, p. 337). Or recall the "brothel cure." Even as some men purchased heterosexual sex as a form of conversion therapy, others, like Camille in *Teleny*, accompanied his friends simply for appearances' sake (p. 59–67). It's hard to imagine a more literal performance of heterosexuality.

Scholars of the Victorian period have noted the ideologically productive tension between homosexuality's simultaneous conception as an invisible predilection and a characteristic discernable primarily in gender nonconformity (Buckton, 1998, p. 115). This tension wasn't simply "a mechanism of domination ... over a minority population" (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 87). If homosexually active men could be blackmailed on the basis of particular indiscretions, the (mostly metaphorical) "blackmailability" of all men depended on more diffuse suspicions of gender deviance (Sedgwick, 1985, p. 89; see also Goldsmith, 1998, pp. 23–24).¹⁰ To say so is not to posit a false equivalence. The fact that homophobic coercion compelled all males to don a masculine mask isn't to deny the threat's disproportionate impact on homosexuals. For one thing, as we've already seen, even the insistently masculinist Symonds and the decidedly rugged Carpenter couldn't help but acknowledge that, for whatever reasons, members of their "tribe" were more likely than the average male to find satisfaction, sporadically or continually, in adopting feminine dress and demeanor (Symonds, 1891, pp. 14–15; Carpenter, 1909, pp. 26–32). Second, despite a fundamental conviction of their own virility, homosexual men—apparently including Carpenter—seem to have been readier to perceive femininity in their own bodies and temperaments (Carpenter, 1916, p. 96; Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, pp. 147, 193, 197). This perception may have been linked to a third reason why the mask of heterosexuality tended to weigh more heavily on queer men: greater anxiety around and sharper attentiveness to the performance of gender, above all one's own.

Conclusion: closet consciousness

In 1991, Diana Fuss wrote that "the historical moment" of the homosexual's "appearance ... as a 'species' also marks the moment of the homosexual's disappearance—into the closet" (p. 4). This is true, we have seen, insofar as all of our contemporary meanings of the closet metaphor fairly describe the experiences of at least some men who lived in the last quarter of the nineteenth century: "latent homosexuality," in all that term's inadequacy; self-disciplinary

strategies of abstention, suppression, and reformation; the double life; and the mask of heterosexuality.

Of course we've known for some time that the symbology of the gay closet has a history that long precedes Stonewall. In *Sexual Anarchy* (1991), Elaine Showalter observed how homosexually-coded Victorian stories, like Stevenson's tale of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, are "permeated" with "images of forced penetration through locked doors into private cabinets, rooms and closets" (p. 110). *Teleny*, as it happens, contains two such scenes (1893/1986, pp. 82, 85–86); there are none in *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds*. The difference, for our purposes, is immaterial. The two texts permit equally rich and candid insight into the psychic and social structures that "the closet" continues to this day to denote; and both attest to the advent of what I call "closet consciousness": a recognition, among certain members of a certain class of men, that the closet's various modalities are phenomenologically and ideologically linked.

Indeed, *Teleny* and Symonds's *Memoirs* are first editions of a now-familiar genre: the coming-out story, that paradigmatic mode of contemporary gay literature and the exemplary act of gay self-disclosure (Robinson, 1999, pp. ix–24, 305–394).¹¹ When written for mass consumption, such stories magnify the political dimension of millions of private confessions. *Teleny* and the *Memoirs* lacked this particular courage. The former originally appeared, anonymously, in a run of 200 copies (Mendes, 1993, p. 252); the latter, as noted earlier, was published nearly a century after its completion. In this difference lies the single most important rift between the late-Victorian closet and our own: a possibility of outness. By "outness," I mean simply the explicit, voluntary, and open affirmation that one is something other than heterosexual. Outness, so conceived, wasn't an option for men like Camille Des Grieux, who was outed by scandal, and John Addington Symonds, whose homosexuality was in certain circles something of an open secret (Kemp, 2000, p. 47; *Teleny*, 1893/1986, p. 188). Outness in this sense is one anachronism that needs too much stretching from its modern meanings to usefully describe the experience of almost any late-Victorian homosexual (Cohen, 1993a, p. 355; Goldhill, 2016, p. 143).¹²

Yet *Teleny* and Symonds's *Memoirs*, along with the writings we've examined them alongside, contain more than a germ of this concept. Outness figures in these texts in three ways. The first, arguably, is a negative conception—outness as escape: "somewhere over the rainbow," "somewhere a place for us" (Halperin, 2002a; Miller, 1998)—"a great valley," perhaps, "bounded by a hundred miles of snowy peaks," with "lakes in its bed; enormous hillsides . . . ; orchards of orange and olive; a perfect climate, where it is bliss enough just to breathe," and where, above all, there's "freedom from the distorted laws of men, for none are near enough to enforce them!" (Taylor, 1870, p. 216). *Teleny* articulates a pretty standard iteration of this theme when Camille dreams of fleeing to "somewhere on the confines of this earth, . . . some lonely island," where he and René might

live ever after “in perfect nakedness” (1893/1986, p. 72). Later in the novel, he has a less idyllic and all the more poignant vision:

Hell, of course, is no excelsior—no place of false aspirations after an unreachable ideal of fallacious hopes and bitter disappointments. Never pretending to be what we are not, we shall find there true contentedness of mind Not being either hypocrites or dissemlers, the dread of being seen such as we really are can never torment us. If we are grossly bad, we shall at least be truthfully so. (pp. 169–170)

A second conception of “outness” appears in our sources as the implicit corollary of a tentatively politicized homosexuality. When a man chose to “abandon the impossible task of suppressing” his desire for other men, he embarked on a double life whose hard-won gratifications—sexual, romantic, and social—could, if he was lucky, lead to further bounties: “peace and happiness” in Camille’s case (*Teleny*, 1893/1986, p. 130); “peace and sanity and gladness” in Symonds’s, as well as “mastery and self-control” and “a consciousness of volition and power” (Symonds, 1891, p. 70, 1984, p. 283). He might come to perceive moral equivalency between hetero- and homosexuality (Ellis & Symonds, 1897/2008, p. 197), and a condition he previously understood in medical, theological, or ethical terms might become susceptible to political analysis. He might still see himself as “unfortunate,” but the blame for that misfortunate might shift from himself (or his creator) to legal prohibitions and “social prejudices” that “stand in the way of . . . natural indulgence” (Symonds, 1891, p. 53). In *Teleny*, for example, when the protagonists’ romance is threatened with exposure, Camille asks: “Was I conscience-stricken? No, it was simply . . . abject fear, not remorse.” (1893/1986, p. 134). One of Krafft-Ebing’s subjects even went so far as to assert that, “[s]ince the majority of [homosexuals], like myself, in no way regret their abnormality, but would be sorry if the condition were changed” (which, he insisted, it “cannot be”), “all our hope” is for repeal of the laws that prohibit it (1892, p. 274).

Needless to say, laws don’t change on their own, and politics can’t be conducted in silence. Neither Symonds nor any of his contemporaries was prepared to speak as an avowed homosexual in a public forum, and potential “straight allies,” as they’d come to be called, were almost uniformly cowed by “the fear of becoming suspected of personal reasons for desiring a change in the law” (Shaw, 1898, p. 230). But some interested parties did recognize that law reform and social transformation depend on candor and visibility. Shortly before he died, Symonds is said to have compiled a lengthy list of prominent homosexuals—a manifestation of his conviction, in which he was hardly alone, that a love “relegated to holes and corners . . . cannot be expected to show its best side to the world” (Symonds, 1891, p. 111; Ellis, 1897/2008, p. 94). Symonds believed that society might change its stance on homosexuality, or might at least confront the issue with greater forthrightness and sympathy, if only it knew “the amount of perverted sexuality it harbors” (Symonds, 1891,

p. 15). To this extent, at least, Symonds understood that homosexuality's closet, not homosexuality itself, was the real problem in modern politics.

Notions of something like “outness,” however vague, rarely appeared outside of works positing homosexuality as a matter for legal and social reform. It may be a sign of late-Victorian homosexuals' resignation to the closet that, despite widely shared resentment of secrecy and dissimulation, their imaginative literature bemoaned the double life and the mask without situating their fantasies of frankness and freedom in their own time and place. Aside from a halting poem by Marc-André Raffalovich (1889),¹³ the most pointed exception I know is to be found—where else?—in *Teleny*. On the one occasion when Camille Des Grieux expresses a desire to publicize his homosexuality, it is love, not politics, that inspires him. The morning after his first night in René's bed, a “world that had hitherto seemed . . . so bleak, so cold, so desolate, was now a perfect paradise I was blithe, merry, happy. Teleny was my lover; I was his. Far from being ashamed of my crime, I felt that I should like to proclaim it to the world” (1893/1986, p. 129).

Notes

1. To date I have found no earlier example than a passage about Tchaikovsky in Skolsky (1944): “[H]e was homosexual, to some degree at least. This was the great dark secret that lay hidden in his closet . . .” (p. 313).
2. A casual internet search for “gay closet” confirms the ubiquitous application of the word “closet” to individuals leading a double life or otherwise maintaining a pretense of heterosexuality. Academic usage is no different. For an example that plainly doesn't equate the closet with “isolation” and “self-hatred,” recall Sedgwick's observation that “there are remarkably few of *even the most openly gay people* [emphasis added] who are not deliberately in the closet with someone personally or economically or institutionally important to them” (1990, p. 68).
3. For thoughtfully compiled collections of this literature, see d'Arch Smith (1970), Reade (1970), and White (1999).
4. Unless otherwise indicated, I rely on the 1986 edition of *Teleny* published by Gay Men's Press, which designated “Oscar Wilde and Others” as the novel's authors. That attribution, though plausible, is far from settled, so this article's reference list and parenthetical citations designate the book by its title.
5. I thank Niall Fahey for uncovering the meaning of *Teleny*'s title—a treasure hidden in plain sight!—and for patiently guiding me through many of the text's classical references.
6. Though hardly great literature, *Teleny* is nonetheless a deeply literary work, replete with allusions to Byron, Cervantes, Chaucer, Dante, Milton, Poe, Rossetti, Shakespeare, Shelley, Swinburne, and Tennyson, as well as, interestingly, John Addington Symonds, the only author mentioned by name (pp. 29, 30, 31, 43, 51, 109, 112, 129, 130, 133, 163, 165, 166, 170, 172, 174, 179). More to the point, *Teleny* exhibits precisely the characteristics that, in Marcus's view, distinguished the Victorian novel from contemporaneous pornography: “a world hedged in with difficulty and pain”; a tone “resonant of danger, doom, and disaster”; and, most importantly, a concern for “the inmost private experience of human beings” (1964, pp. 17, 247).

7. This confession has a striking counterpart in the equally pornographic *Sins of the Cities of the Plain*, whose narrator remembers having “a peculiar interest” in penises “and everything relating to them” for as long as “memory [can] carry me back. And yet, I was hardly aware of my predilection or at least I did not sense its true nature until I was late in my teens” (Saul, 1881/2006, p. 17).
8. For an alternative way to think about ostensibly latent homosexuality, see Wilkerson (2000), pp. 261–262.
9. For a discussion of twentieth-century men whose closets accommodated no more than “impersonal and anonymous sex,” (see McCarthy, 1994, p. 33).
10. Not all conduct indicative of homosexuality was “feminine” or “effeminate”; it was simply something a “real” man shouldn’t and generally wouldn’t do, like socializing with known or suspected homosexuals. That’s why Algernon Charles Swinburne repudiated his friend Simeon Solomon, why Charles Ives shrank from being seen in public with the ex-convict Oscar Wilde, and why, in *Teleny*, Camille’s acquaintances all abandon him when his ill-fated romance becomes “public property” (d’Arch Smith, 1970, p. 112; Pearsall, 1969, p. 451; *Teleny*, 1893/1984, p. 182).
11. Ed Cohen (1993a) “anachronistically nominate[d] Symonds’s *Memoirs* as the first ‘coming out story’” in an essay on the sense of “doubleness” that pervades confessional texts by late-Victorian homosexuals (pp. 361, 362).
12. Graham Robb (2003) writes that, “in the nineteenth century, with the unique exception of Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, there is not a single example of someone publicly declaring their homosexuality” (p. 127).
13. Put on that languor which the world frowns on,
That blamed misleading strangeness of attire,
And let them see that see us we have done
With their false worldliness and look up higher.
Because the world has treated us so ill
And brought suspicion near our happiness,
Let men that like to slander as they will; It shall not be my fault if we love less.
Because we two who never did them harm,
And never dreamt of harm ourselves, find men
So eager to perplex us and alarm
And scare from us our dove-like thoughts, well then,
 Since ’twixt the world and truth must be our choice,
 Let us seem vile, not be so, and rejoice.
(Raffalovich, 1889, p. 144).

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ORCID

Michael Boucai  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4547-3827>

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