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PERVERSION, PURITY SOCIETIES AND DISCURSIVE CONTROL IN FIN DE SIÈCLE ENGLAND

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Abstract: The moral and sexual supervision of boys and young men became formalized in the purity movements which proliferated at the end of the century. Perhaps the most notable example was the Church of England Purity Society which was formed in 1880. The Church of England Purity Society was one part of the discursive controls which represented responses to continued calls for an attempt to redefine masculine ideology. Most importantly, it was a way of aligning the male body with the body of Christ. Moral authority was vested in the Purity Society, which provided exemplars for young men but responsibility for careful supervision was placed with middle-class parents. This paper will address the effectiveness of these discursive controls, arguing that rather than improving the morality of the middle classes, they succeeded only in foregrounding and intensifying preoccupation with perverse sexuality. It argues that the writings and actions of moral campaigners, clergy and sexologists show an awareness of a society in transition and a sense of anxiety of sexual order turning into sexual disorder. The purity societies mobilized confession and surveillance as devices of sexual normalization, yet a reading of nineteenth-century textual evidence shows complex reactions to these devices, and suggests their own transition from devices of normalization to sites of resistance.

English society of the *fin de siècle* was characterized by anxiety, introspection, and an intense uncertainty about the future of the middle classes, the country, and the Empire. Anxiety centred on the physical and moral well-being of the young men who were the future of the Empire (Spencer, 204). Moral panic during this period was heightened by sexual scandals and marked by fears of social disintegration. During the final decades of the nineteenth century, bourgeois English society reacted to a shift from cultural order to cultural disorder and perverse sexuality by enacting discursive controls embodied and techniques of surveillance and confession and enacted in practical terms through purity movements. Because the *fin de siècle* period was a time of uncertainty and incipient disorder, and because the need for a secure and prosperous future was overwhelming at the turn of the century, the middle-class youth (the hope of the future) became the focus of an unprecedented range of discursive controls and techniques of surveillance. This paper considers the deployment of processes of normalization among

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the late-Victorian middle classes and examines purity societies as a filter for understanding the sexual anxiety of the period. The societies are meaningful examples of how discursive controls and techniques of surveillance could, it was hoped, reinforce order in what was increasingly perceived as a confused and disordered society.

A study of discursive controls, particularly through the purity movements, will show how the supervision of boys and young men became more formalized in these organizations which proliferated at the end of the century. The most notable example was the Church of England Purity Society which was formed in 1880. The Church of England Purity Society represented responses to continued calls for an attempt to redefine masculine ideology. They flourished and were applauded by many – clergy, feminists, and purity campaigners – yet this paper will argue that, paradoxically, they were also counter-productive as discursive instruments. Scholars recognize purity movements as censorious and, in their emphasis on collective well-being and community endeavour, as potent forces of social control (Weeks 216). But less recognized is that the targets of surveillance, and those from whom confessions were exhorted, could articulate interpretations of sexual normalcy distinct from the expectations of purity campaigners. A lacuna in the modern scholarship is the extent to which questions of sexual propriety and the resistance of normalization converged in middle class concerns with perversion and respectability as purity societies became sites of resistance to sexual normalcy. Using textual evidence from a range of *fin de siècle* sources, including *My Secret Life*, this paper will show how the aims of the purity societies could be subverted. The sources consulted in this paper illuminate how purity campaigners had recourse to techniques of surveillance and exhorted confessions, but they also show how normative sexuality could be resisted and provides a rich source of material for assessing reactions to purity societies. Ultimately, this paper will argue that these movements served to highlight and even legitimate sexual perversion. This paper explains how the purity societies themselves became sites of resistance. It interprets not only a society in transition – from order to disorder – but also the transition of sites of sexual normalcy into sites of resistance. Overall this paper's central purpose is to interpret the failures of purity movements and to make sense of the interaction of surveillance, confession and deviance.

This paper will proceed firstly through analysis of systems of regulation; techniques of surveillance, combined with the deployment of discourses to categorize normal and perverse sexuality as an affirmation of bourgeois hegemony and normality. It will show how these devices – underpinned by actions of the purity movements – attempted to impose order in a chaotic society. The confessional literature itself will be evaluated from the point of view of the representation of aberrance and attempts at normalization. Then the system of regulation found in purity societies will be examined, and the subversion of the work of purity campaigners will be asserted.

Transgressive Conduct and Victorian Sexuality

Purity movements reached their apotheosis during the *fin de siècle*, but, for nearly two hundred years, authority had been vested in earlier forms of purity movements,

precursors of the Church of England Purity Society Movement. As an example, the Societies for the Reformation of Manners appeared “after the medieval ecclesiastical jurisdiction over moral offences had broken down and before the secular authorities were capable of filling the breach” (Bristow 3). Members of the Societies encouraged individuals to report and urge the prosecution of “moral transgressors”, including “prostitutes, keepers of bawdy houses ... and homosexuals” (Bristow 2). The members of the Societies for the Reformation of Manners “actively encouraged individuals to watch for and report violations among their neighbors and friends” (Cohen 111). By the nineteenth century, purity societies often emerged from episodes of social panic. Later during the moral and social panics of the Jack the Ripper murders in 1888 members of the Church of England Purity Society were called upon to closely monitor the streets of London and to coordinate attempts to report suspicious behaviour. Similarly, noteworthy moral crusades, such as the publication of W.T.Stead’s *The Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon*, prompted the foundation of purity movements (Petrow 122).

In Victorian society of the late-nineteenth century, conduct – especially sexual conduct – was strictly monitored by purity campaigners; notions of normalcy and abnormalcy were shaped by cultural considerations, the discourses on sexuality were the locus of power relations. George Mosse, writing in a German context, but incorporating a wider perspective, points out that European nations were not complacent in the face of “disordered” societies. He links the history of sexuality to the history of nationalism, which “provided the means through which changing sexual attitudes could be absorbed and tamed into respectability” (Mosse 222).

This preoccupation with perversion may be clearly seen in the arguments of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, the major work of the late-nineteenth-century sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who asserted that “the welfare of society ... demands ... that it [sexuality] should be examined scientifically” (Krafft-Ebing iv). Krafft-Ebing’s lengthy discourse on such “sexual perversions” as sadism, masochism, bestiality and fetishism focused attention on the perverse while encouraging behaviour which was morally and socially acceptable. In assessing this text, this paper takes issue with Foucault’s assertion that “the great medico-psychological domain of the “perversions” had taken over from “the old moral categories of debauchery and excess” (Krafft-Ebing 118). Textual evidence from the period stressed the importance of purity and nobility in the individual and it was from these medical and social discourses that the goals of the ecclesiastical purity societies emerged: “Only will-power and a strong character can emancipate man from the meanness of his corrupt nature, and teach him how to enjoy the pure pleasures of love and pluck the noble fruits of earthly existence (Krafft-Ebing 5). Speaking more generally, Krafft-Ebing claimed that “episodes of moral decay always coincide with the progression of effeminacy, lewdness and luxuriance of the nations” (Krafft-Ebing 6). Medico-psychological discourses may have extended the arguments, but the moral categories, through which nations could eschew “lewdness” and “luxuriance” remained.

As might be considered, von Krafft-Ebing paid attention to the mental and psychological dimensions of purity; for example he warned that masturbating children

“frequently sink into dementia, or become subjects of severe degenerative neuroses or psychoses” (Krafft-Ebing 38). In contrast, Dr R. T. Trall’s emphasis was on the physical effects. Trall warned of the child marked by “the hollow, sunken eye, the blanched cheek, the withered hands, and emaciated frame, and the listless life” caused by the evils of “self-pollution” (Trall vi).

The Operation of Purity Societies

In this period, discourse is revealed at its most consistently censorious; it appeared in the cautionary tracts of clergymen, doctors, sexologists, psychiatrists and educators. The emphasis on the dichotomous notions of purity and dirt aligned these discourses with the purity movements which proliferated during the *fin de siècle* and in which surveillance was formalized. The Church of England Purity Society and the White Cross League were formed in 1880 under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury, supported by a number of other bishops. It was focused on middle class youths and according to Bartley was also focused on repression (156). These associations, explains Bartley, “relied on the “pulpit power” of the parish priest, Sunday school teachers and others who had spiritual charge over their congregations” (156). The White Cross League, in particular, operated on military lines. As Morgan explains: “Members were addressed as “soldiers”, for example, and the qualities of self-discipline, duty and comradeship were perceived as integral to the battle against sexual impurity” (164).

Within the framework of purity societies, boys were observed throughout the day and monitored at night. For many respectable citizens, surveillance within the family was augmented by placing boys and youths within the reassuring and wholesome environment of a purity society. Boys listened to uplifting lectures from clergy and, to maintain a healthy and uncorrupted body, they were encouraged to become members of clubs, conducted under the auspices of the purity societies, where drilling and military exercises were popular. These clubs, together with the purity societies generally, facilitated both exhortation and surveillance. Ironically, many of the purity societies flourished among those same middle-class women who were criticized for failing to uphold the high standards of their mothers.

The middle-class boy was monitored in the home and as a member of a purity society. However, surveillance did not stop there. Within such organizations, power comes from “general visibility” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 171); at a more sophisticated level the same principle operates within society. During the *fin de siècle* panopticism, the general scrutiny of a wide sector of society, may not have been possible throughout the community but the structured nature of nineteenth-century bourgeois society facilitated the deployment of techniques of surveillance.

Respectability was local and in many cases, quite specifically domestic; the responsibility for careful supervision was placed with middle-class parents. Dr John B. Newman had already articulated this command clearly in 1870, counselling parents to “look well to their [children’s] diet, exercise, habits, and study, and keep them under as close surveillance as possible” (53). The purpose underlining the Church of England

Purity Society is highlighted by these injunctions and their middle-class, domestic targets. The Church of England Purity Society provided exemplars and training for young men. As an example, physical recreation was widely endorsed, not only as an instrument of spiritual development but also as a medium for training the young to meet with the diverse challenges of a naturally harsh and competitive materialistic world. The goals of the Church of England Purity Society interacted with the domestic sphere. The exhortations of purity campaigners converged with the surveillance of their children by parents. For example in 1870 Sylvester Graham, “teacher and philanthropist”, in his “Lectures to Young Men”, exhorted young men to join the “noble and exciting enterprise” of moral and sexual surveillance (Trall xvi). This surveillance was formalized in the activities of the purity groups and in the responsibilities placed on parents by commentators such as Dr Acton, who urged surveillance on parents who should be “wisely watching children in early life” (53).

The concerns of bourgeois society rested on fears of cultural confusion and uncertainty about the future. Paula Bartley argues that “the social purity movement overall was a complex mixture of repression, protection and liberation” (154). However, Foucault provides a counter argument: that the aim of surveillance and the punishment of improper behaviour are neither “expiation” nor “repression” (*Discipline and Punish* 182). The effective functioning of institutions, and by extension, of bourgeois society during the *fin de siècle*, was dependent upon normalization, which became “one of the great instruments of power” (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 184).

Purity Movements as Sites of Resistance

The purity societies were a means of normalization. Yet the efficacy of supervision is questionable. They also reveal themselves as sites of resistance to discursive control and normative behaviour. The extent of Victorian concerns about social and sexual disorder is confirmed through the multitude of purity campaigns throughout the *fin de siècle*. Purity societies are in many ways a recognition of and a response to dominant sexual anxieties. The aims of their founders, including bishops, clergymen, sexologists and moral crusaders, derived from their concern to regulate sexual behaviour through observing and cataloguing deviant and perverse sexualities. If, as Bataille argues, society functions through a reconciliation of “the taboo and its transgression”, erotic secret lives may have been secret but were tacitly acknowledged, surveyed and confessed to and, if not condoned, then tolerated (36). While bourgeois society of the nineteenth century was characterized by “blatant perversion”, there was, at the same time, a quite explicit acknowledgement of that perversion (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* I 37, 47).

Thus, the anxieties of the *fin de siècle* show the dichotomies present during the latter half of the nineteenth century. They are clearly representative of a society which is materialistic as well as patriarchal and firmly class-based. Yet in journalist and social critic Henry Mayhew’s formulation, the destructive effects of materialism are obvious: “Commerce is incontestably demoralizing. Its effects are to be seen more and more every

day.... seduction and prostitution, in spite of the precepts of the Church, and the examples of her ministers, have made enormous strides in all our great towns within the last twenty years” (112). In the 1880s, education continued as a discursive control for the respectable bourgeoisie in response to these disorders; Richard Le Gallienne, a friend of Oscar Wilde, wrote that “Matthew Arnold, as late as 1888, was still preaching “sweetness and light” to a world of Philistines” (10).

The discursive controls which functioned as normalizing devices were part of a larger framework of surveillance. Drunkenness, prostitution, violation of the Sabbath, gambling, swearing, and other “corruptions of manners,” were believed by clergy to abound; their unchecked proliferation seemed to testify to a loss of authority by the society’s great institutions and “to undermine the culture’s very foundations” (Cohen 109). Le Gallienne wrote: “The theological conceptions of our fathers had suffered serious disintegration, and the social sanctions and restrictions founded upon them were rapidly losing their authority” (129).

The final decades of the nineteenth century saw a strengthening of similar endeavours to curb illicit sexual activity and confirm the importance of the family. The Purity Society and the White Cross League were responses to continued calls for a return to moral purity, both of which attempted to redefine masculine ideology, linking it with purity, and aligning the male body with the body of Christ. Middle-class boys were an important focus of these societies, but their influence extended to young men. Thousands of men pledged themselves to chastity, encouraged to “reject all non reproductive, non-marital sexual desires in order to reassert their larger patriarchal privilege” (Cohen 87). Like the traditional confession, these leagues relied on self-examination, but they also encouraged self-surveillance, particularly among men: “[W]hereas men had heretofore been supposed to look to women as the guardians of moral rectitude, the pledge shifted the burden of moral responsibility to men themselves” (Cohen 87). The increasing pressure placed upon men again intensified the potential for neurotic conditions, partly because the burden of guilt could not be displaced onto an authority figure. The image of male athleticism and vigour implicit in the symbolism of the White Cross League – that of St George on his steed – was counterpoised by the homoerotic representations of the crucified or flagellant Christ and St Sebastian pierced by arrows. These culturally approved figures, showing a masochistic delight in torment, were popular at the time and St Sebastian was to become the favourite martyr of homosexual men, showing the uneasy relationship between surveillance and perversion (Lucie-Smith 216-19).

Also functioning through surveillance activities, and controlled largely by middle-class women, the National Vigilance Association for the Repression of Criminal Vice and Immorality was established in 1885, one of a number of vigilance associations. One “sister society” was the Central Vigilance Committee, characterized by a reforming zeal which emerged from the hierarchy of the Church of England. On 13 October 1885, the *Pall Mall Gazette* reported on the Central Vigilance Committee’s annual meeting, presided over by the Bishop of London. He noted the improvement in public opinion on the subject of immorality: “There was unquestionably ... a very great change in the

feeling among the great body of the people in this matter within the last dozen years. The feeling was now very widespread and very deep, and was certain to increase rather than to diminish. They were doing their best to stem the current tide of immorality” (Pall Mall Gazette 10). Much of the support for the Vigilance Associations came from late-Victorian “feminists”, including Josephine Butler, outraged at the subordination of women in this patriarchal culture. Prostitution was perhaps the major target of their members, but they were equally disturbed by the lack of sexual rights afforded to married women.

Yet in spite of their promulgation of repressive sexual codes and attempts to limit sexual opportunities, and their early optimism, the purity societies were largely unsuccessful in effecting their stated aims of suppressing vice and improving public morality. Indeed, the purity societies and the efforts of their founders and became, in the charged atmosphere of the *fin de siècle*, potent vehicles for resistance to sexual and social normalization. The purity movements were representative of a society which exerted strong pressures to conform to social norms. Yet social dynamics of this nature are likely to impose social classifications which are too narrow and which in fact highlight deviance from social standards because they are inadequate configurations of reality. Responses to purity movements emanating from the *fin de siècle* suggest the encouragement that purity campaigns gave to robust resistance. “Walter”, the pseudonymous author of an underworld epic, comments in the final chapters of *My Secret Life*, written in the 1880s: “[P]ublic improvements and public purity!!! have destroyed most of the best central [bagnios], public morals being seemingly not much bettered” (1842).

The purity societies in fact became disconcerting affirmations of the relationship between control and perversion. Although purity societies were intended to check this rise, they in fact became sites of resistance. Even as purity societies were founded, there took place a number of sexual scandals, including the Boulton and Parke case in 1871, in which Earnest Boulton and Frederick William Parke were charged with “conspiring and inciting persons to commit and unnatural offence”, although the case was largely unproved. As Ronald Pearsall comments, “What was left? Merely that a couple of men had dressed in drag” (461, 465). The Cleveland Street affair of 1889-90 was more worrying for the anxious middle classes. It involved adolescent boys selling sexual favours at a homosexual introduction house and brothel in London. One of the clients was assistant equerry to the Prince of Wales. It was suggested that the Prince himself intervened to “cover up” the incident because the Heir Apparent may have been implicated in male-male sexual scandals (Dellamorca 206-7).

While the purity societies and the domestic environment interacted with each other in the imposition of surveillance and the extraction of confession, the purity societies themselves participated directly but unwittingly in the perversion of the *fin de siècle*. The anxiety about perverse sexuality and the antagonism towards perverse sexual practices expressed by the respectable middle classes could only be intensified by the confessional literature of the 1880s and 1890s which far from operating as an agent of regulation, seemed to indicate a rise in decadent behaviour and actions, especially in urban areas. Kincaid refers to an “alliance of purity and sexuality” informing much

Victorian confessional discourse, an insight that may be pursued in relation to the purity societies themselves (198). As Hepworth and Turner point out: “Sexuality, knowledge of power over it, becomes the principal means of access to the body, the family, the wider society and the basic processes of the life of the species” (97). Through confession, it was assumed, the body was controlled and desire was displaced and modified. The “abnormal behaviour of hysterical women, perverse adults and children engaged in “solitary vices” could more readily be corrected after a thorough and detailed confession.

By the final decades of the nineteenth century, the act of confession had entered the domains of education, religion, medicine and law, especially confessions of deviant sexuality among young men. As Marian Shaw notes, the homosexual confessions published in Havelock Ellis’s text *Sexual Inversion* “are paradigmatic of the scientific confessions which abound during the last years of Victoria’s reign and in which dark, perverse, transgressive yet nevertheless true secrets are apparently discovered and brought into “normal consciousness” (90). Appearing in a series of relationships, gradually took on a variety of forms: “interrogations, consultations, autobiographical narratives, letters; they have been recorded, transcribed, assembled into dossiers, published, and commented on” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* I 63).

Important evidence for how confession became sites of resistance against sexual normalization comes from Dr William Acton. Acton exhorted the readers of his *The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Childhood, Youth, Adult Age, and Advanced Life* to subject the body, especially the bodies of young males, to “regular and determined discipline” (27). However, in one edition of his text, Acton also quoted from an unsolicited letter from one his readers, in which the writer, a parent, confessed to masturbating as a child but insisted that his actions “never had the effect on me I should have expected from reading your book, inasmuch as I have always appeared and felt strong, healthy, vigorous at school, very fond of play, subsequently well able to perform my daily duties either as regards business or intellectual engagements and have never been averse to society” (43). Acton’s acknowledgment of this correspondence and his quotation from it is shot through with ambiguity. Acton’s warnings against sexual disorder converged with campaigns for purity in morals and conduct and were part of a wider discourse by purity campaigners, clergy, sexologists and educators. In Acton’s hands, this letter became partly a typical nineteenth-century confession of perversions past, in response to exhortations such as were emerging from contemporary purity movements. Yet the letter also displayed a perverse refusal of the type of transformative, normative behaviour that the purity movements were intended to inculcate.

“Walter” displayed the same perverse resistance, even as he confessed and was subject to surveillance. He mentions a book he was given in his youth which underlined the warnings of medical “experts”: “Frigging ... was treated of and the terrible accounts of people dying through it, and being put into straight waistcoats, etc., I have no doubt were useful to me” (I 40). Like Acton’s correspondent, but less surprisingly, “Walter” confessed, but resisted the normative effects of discursive controls and purity campaigns. Perversion, he affirmed, had no long-term negative effect, in contradiction of the warnings and exhortations of purity campaigners and medical experts.

The confessional nature of “Walter’s” text is established by the author’s scrupulous, even obsessive, recording of his thoughts and actions. It is confessional largely because it reveals a “truth” extracted “from the depths of oneself” (Foucault, *History of Sexuality* I 59). Mike Hepworth and Bryan Turner have usefully extended Foucault’s discussion of confession, noting its function as a normalizing agency, a “ritual in inclusion by which deviant members of the community are restored to their normal roles and status” and also emphasizing the role of “ritualized expressions of guilt, sorrow, self-criticism and remorse” (22). *My Secret Life* is located within the confessional mode but offers little evidence of normalization or of the existence of “the private self tormented by guilt and the private conscience exposed to self-criticism” (Hepworth and Turner 8). Both the secrecy and the intensely private nature of his confession, together with his wilfulness and the absence of remorse, circumvent any notion of social inclusion. Here, “a vomit of lascivious disclosures” clearly demonstrates that the confessional mode and exhortations to purity were not normative or balanced (“Walter”, IX 74, 75). There is no re-orientation of the subject socially, as Foucault or Hepworth and Turner suggest. Nor is this the kind of expiation required by Victorian vigilance societies or the Church of England Purity Society. As Foucault argues, “[d]iscourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it” (*History of Sexuality* 101). The purity societies reflect the confusion in expression and the diffusion of this power.

The Failure of Purity Movements

In the fevered atmosphere of the *fin de siècle*, English society was marked by increased introspection and anxiety about the future. At this time, writes Lawrence James, “[a] nation which had been so full of self-confidence forty to fifty years earlier, when it had appeared the supreme force for mankind’s improvement, was now tormented by apprehension” (212). The activities of purity movements had achieved little change, despite the hard work of campaigners such as Josephine Butler. As Caine states, “the great upsurge of moral fervor and of activity to curb sexual licence and promote social purity, which occurred in the mid-1880s, did not bring the changes which Butler sought” (190). Surveillance, discursive controls and confession effected no real moderation in attitudes or behaviour. As Bartley argues, “social purists did not find it easy to ... curb child abuse, sexual immorality and obscene literature” (193). Caine and Bartley separately echo the claims made by Jeffrey Weeks. In his detailed examination of the regulation of sexuality, Weeks underlines the accuracy of “Walter’s” assertion that warnings had an educative rather than an admonitory effect and takes it a step further. Weeks claims there is “a strong case to be made that the moralistic campaigns around sexuality encouraged ... as a response a more radical position on sexuality”. Sexuality was given a positive value, becoming “a subversive force which challenged the tyranny of respectability” (91-2). By the end of the nineteenth century, public outrage and the continued efforts of reform groups had brought little change; prostitution and brothels remained ubiquitous, and perverse sexuality, as underlined by the widely publicized case of Oscar Wilde, increased rather than diminished.

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