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Re-reading the Radical in John Addington Symonds's *Memoirs*: Poetry, Intertextuality, and Queer Self-Construction

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ABSTRACT: Throughout his literary career, John Addington Symonds (1840-1893) wrote about queer identities and relationships in almost every conceivable form – a body of work which culminated with the *Memoirs*. A detailed account of Symonds's life as a homosexual man in the nineteenth century which traces chronologically the stages of his sexual development, in the *Memoirs* – commenced in 1889 – Symonds attempts to construct his sexual identity through a number of authorial voices in a highly intertextual method of autobiographical composition. Most significantly, the interpolation of poetry written by himself and others foregrounds verse as the dominant textual authority of the *Memoirs*. This article enacts a re-reading of the radical in the *Memoirs*, investigating Symonds's assertion that poetry occupies a privileged position in the process of sexual self-formation for queer subjects, and, as an extension, his understanding that poetry displays (and somewhat facilitates) the queer self to be collectively experienced and articulated, as opposed to existing as an individual, alienated identity.

KEYWORDS: John Addington Symonds; Queer; Poetry; Life Writing; History of Sexuality; Intertextuality

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NEARING THE END of a prolific literary career spanning several decades, poet, critic, and cultural historian John Addington Symonds began working on the creation of his comprehensive autobiographical project, the *Memoirs*, in 1889. A detailed account of Symonds's life as a homosexual man in the nineteenth century which traces chronologically the stages of his sexual development, the *Memoirs* exists as the product of a relentless desire to construct and articulate his sexual self through literature; an endeavour which saw him write and publish works on queer identities and relationships

in almost every conceivable form.[1] Despite tackling the subject of same-sex love in poetry, literary criticism, historical essays, and sexological studies, by the age of forty-nine – a few years before his death in 1893 – Symonds felt that he had not yet fully accomplished his mission of sexual self-revelation. In a letter to his close friend Henry Graham Dakyns, Symonds cites this perceived gap in his oeuvre as the motivation for commencing his *Memoirs*: 'You see I have "never spoken out."'[2] In this text, then, Symonds 'speaks out' about his sexual identity, but he does so through a number of voices which emerge from a highly intertextual practice of autobiographical composition. Chief among them is Symonds's poetic voice, which repeatedly displaces Symonds's autobiographical prose and foregrounds verse as the principal textual authority of the *Memoirs*. Not only, then, is the text itself a radical exposition of homosexuality in the nineteenth century (and a work of queer confession that was in Symonds's own historical moment unprecedented), the polyphonic approach to textual self-construction employed in the *Memoirs* also encourages a radical re-reading of the text, which proposes that poetry was an essential component in the process of sexual self-formation in literature for queer male Victorian writers. The *Memoirs* can thus be read as radical in several distinct but overlapping ways. The relationship Symonds establishes between lyric poetry and autobiography in his attempt to articulate his experience as a queer man makes the radical literary claim that the formal strictures of traditional life-writing cannot sufficiently accommodate queer self-construction. Symonds's continued emphasis on the importance of reading, writing, and assembling poetry in the *Memoirs* also proposes a radical conception of queer selfhood that is for himself at least partially contingent on consuming and composing verse. Lastly, Symonds repeatedly (though indirectly) asserts that the queer subject may be plausibly

[1] Acknowledging the anachronism, I occasionally use the term 'homosexual' as a convenient shorthand to demarcate sexual differences and draw focus specifically toward male-male love, which occupies most of Symonds's *Memoirs*. I will most often use 'queer' as a more historically appropriate term which acknowledges the wider potential of ideas discussed in this article beyond the strict focus of male homosexual self-formation in poetry and autobiography. The phrase 'queer self-construction' is used specifically to discuss the dual processes of the formation and expression of (non-hetero)sexual selfhood in literature, and to consider how these processes intersect and overlap.

[2] John Addington Symonds to Henry Graham Dakyns (March 27, 1889), in *The Letters of John Addington Symonds*, ed. by Herbert M. Schueller and Robert L. Peters, 3 vols (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1967-69), III (1969), p. 364.

understood as a collective rather than a singular identity, taking a radical stance that significantly diverts from contemporary notions of queerness as an individual and solitary pathology.

In his various writings on non-normative desire and the queer self, Symonds had two principal aims. First, he sought to use literature as a vehicle for his own sexual self-formation. Symonds used writing not simply as a means of articulating an already established (homo)sexual self, but to uncover those fragments of his sexual identity which in Michel Foucault's assessment were 'incapable of coming to light except [...] through the labor of confession'.[3] The memoir as an innately confessional mode therefore ostensibly functioned as a suitable and effective arena for Symonds's construction of self. Secondly, as he grew increasingly aware of the social, medical, and legal discourses which respectively demonised, pathologized, and criminalised the queer individual, Symonds wished to advocate a radical shift in the existing cultural (mis)understanding of non-heterosexual selves in the nineteenth century. As a means of realising these objectives in the *Memoirs*, Symonds fuses different genres and modes of expression to construct the richest, most accurate portrait of his sexual self. Explaining his practice of autobiographical composition, Symonds writes that the 'report has to be supplemented indeed, in order that a perfect portrait may be painted of the man'.[4] The result of such an approach to textual construction is a highly heterogeneous narrative which is described by Amber K. Regis, the most recent editor of the text, as a 'bulky assemblage of diverse materials, genres and narrative voices', asserting that the *Memoirs* is a fundamentally intertextual account which Symonds creates by drawing from and interpolating into the text numerous other works.[5] Of the various intertexts he incorporates, including letters and diary entries written by himself and others at different stages in his life, no literary mode is more significant in Symonds's sexual self-construction in the *Memoirs* than poetry.

[3] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 66.

[4] John Addington Symonds, *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Amber K. Regis (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), p. 478. Further references to this edition are given after quotations in the text, abbreviated as *Memoirs*.

[5] Regis, 'Notes on the Text' in *The Memoirs*, p. ix.

From beginning to end, Symonds consistently inserts or alludes to works of poetry by himself and others, as well as devoting large sections of the text to the contemplation of poetry as a literary form and the processes of reading and writing verse. This insertion of poetry into the *Memoirs* manuscript is achieved using different methods; with some poems transcribed, others cut and pasted from privately printed pamphlets, and a small number cut and pasted with additional revisions in Symonds's hand. In keeping, then, with the assemblage of authorial voices that narrate the *Memoirs*, Symonds's material engagement with poetry in the composition of the manuscript implicitly rejects the notion of queer selfhood as monolithic, instead producing a textual portrait of the queer subject that is complex, composite, and flexible. At various points, Symonds also interrupts his retrospective life narrative with self-conscious reflections on the limitations of autobiographical prose and shares his occasional struggle with using this form to express the intricacies of his emotional and sexual past. This struggle often leads Symonds to consider the complete abandonment of his autobiographical undertaking. In a passage marked for deletion in the *Memoirs* manuscript, Symonds writes: 'Here I feel inclined to lay my pen down in weariness. Why should I go on to tell the story of my life?' (*Memoirs*, 188, n. 50), and several letters written to close friends when he commenced the *Memoirs* also show him pre-empting this persistent temptation to discontinue the project: 'I do not know therefore what will come of this undertaking. Very likely, I shall lay it aside'.[6] Poetry, then, enables Symonds to circumvent some of the constraints of the prose commentary typically deployed in conventional life writing, because, throughout his life, verse functioned in his own words as 'the vehicle and safety-valve for [his] tormenting occupations' (*Memoirs*, 367).

The importance of poetry in Symonds's sexual self-formation is established in the *Memoirs* in several ways. First, he reflects on his readings of many hugely impactful poems consumed throughout his life, works which articulated his experience of queer desire and in which he saw himself represented for the first time, living as he was in a cultural epoch which saw virtually no legitimate representation of same-sex love or relationships. Symonds arranges these influential poetic works in conjunction with key episodes in the broader life narrative that unfolds in the *Memoirs*, assembling the poems he read as a means of mapping his sexual development and further shaping his sexual identity. Most significantly, however, he interpolates into the *Memoirs* a number

[6] Symonds to Dakyns (March 27, 1889), in *Letters*, III (1969), p. 364.

of extracts and full poems of his own creation, works in verse which reveal, as he himself claims, his 'deepest self'.[7] He thus consistently relies on his poetic voice to accompany, or supersede, that which narrates his autobiographical prose commentary, both because of its temporal proximity to the moods and feelings experienced during significant sexual episodes in his life, as well as the depth of introspection and space for creative experimentation offered by the lyric poem in particular. In devoting close attention to the insertion of Symonds's own poetry in the *Memoirs* – which enables a comparison of the generic features of autobiographical prose and the lyric poem – this article seeks to negotiate the function and significance of these contrasting forms in queer self-construction. Such an investigation allows us to uncover the most radical notion to be drawn from Symonds's *Memoirs*: that reading, writing, and assembling poetry is not merely an effective tool for his articulation of sexual selfhood but is, instead, of vital importance to this practice.

Existing scholarship on Symonds, in David Amigoni and Amber K. Regis's assessment, has largely been dominated by a fascination with his 'life – and his attempts to order and understand that life', a trend that I continue to engage with.[8] Following the publication of Phyllis Grosskurth's edition of the *Memoirs* in 1984, a renewed interest in Symonds resulted in a substantial collection of essays gathered in John Pemble's *John Addington Symonds: Culture and the Demon Desire* (2000) which began 'the important work of repositioning Symonds as a central part of Britain's nineteenth-century queer heritage'.[9] However, Amigoni and Regis's survey of more recent critical attention directed toward Symonds serves to highlight the glaring oversight of poetry as a crucial element in this very process of self-formation that has been of persistent interest to Symonds scholars. Criticism has focused broadly on the *Memoirs*, 'travel writing and autobiographical essays', and his 'contributions to histories of the Renaissance and Antiquity', while Symonds as poet remains largely overlooked.[10] Even those works which have offered astute and interesting perspectives on the *Memoirs*

[7] Symonds to Horatio Forbes Brown (November 13, 1881), in *Letters*, II (1968), p. 708; Symonds to Dr George C. Wilkinson (December 26, 1881), in *Letters*, II (1968), p. 723.

[8] David Amigoni and Amber K. Regis, 'Introduction: (Re)Reading John Addington Symonds (1840-93), *English Studies*, 94 (2013), 131-136 (p. 3).

[9] Ibid., p. 1.

[10] Ibid., pp. 3, 4.

have repeatedly discarded or overlooked the unique intertextual fabric of the text and thus the broader role of poetry in Symonds's attempt to articulate a queer self, or selves, in literature. Additionally, in almost every piece of scholarship on Symonds, 'poet' is elided from the list of titles frequently attributed to him – Sarah J. Heidt calls him a 'translator, historian, and man of letters', Emily Rutherford refers to him as 'historian and essayist', while Dustin Friedman opts for 'historian and defender of homosexuality', and the list goes on.[11] Examining in depth the omnipresence of poetry in the *Memoirs*, this article seeks to initiate the necessary work of reclaiming Symonds as poet whilst simultaneously undertaking a re-reading of the *Memoirs* itself as a radical text.

This complex and hugely significant relationship between poetry and queer self-construction therefore serves as the central focus of this article, and in my examination of Symonds's *Memoirs* can effectively be divided into two central halves which comprise the respective sections of this study: *reading* the self and *writing* the self. First, I closely analyse two of the most significant poetic intertextual references and allusions in the *Memoirs*: William Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis* (1593) and William Johnson Cory's *Ionica* (1858). Another substantial poetic influence is Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* (1855-1891), though, as the most frequently explored in critical scholarship before now, the influence of this text has been omitted here in order to devote sufficient attention to those less familiar (namely, Cory's *Ionica*).[12] Considering the influence of these poets and their works on Symonds's continually evolving sexual self-understanding, as well as his textual arrangement of them as key autobiographical events in his life narrative, this section asserts the importance of reading poetry produced by others in the formation of Symonds's sexual identity. I then turn to the insertion of Symonds's own poetry in the *Memoirs* and compare the generic features of autobiographical prose and

[11] Sarah J. Heidt, '"Let JAS Words Stand": Publishing John Addington Symonds's Desires', *Victorian Studies*, 46 (2003), 7-31 (p. 7); Emily Rutherford, 'Impossible Love and Victorian Values: J. A. Symonds and the Intellectual History of Homosexuality', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 75 (2014), 605-627 (p. 605); Dustin Friedman, *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2019), p. 38.

[12] For key discussions of Whitman's influence on Symonds and others, see: Michael Robertson, *Worshipping Walt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), pp. 139-197; William Pannapacker, *Revised Lives: Walt Whitman and Nineteenth-Century Authorship* (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 107-130; Gregory Woods, '"Still on My Lips": Walt Whitman in Britain' in *The Continuing Presence of Walt Whitman*, ed. Robert K. Martin (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), pp. 129-140.

the lyric poem, considering the function and significance of these contrasting forms in queer self-construction. This section directs particular attention to notions of (queer) lyric subjectivity and literary form, and recognises Symonds's dual objectives as poet and memoirist: to shift elegantly between recounting the idiosyncrasies of his personal life as a singular, individual subject, and envisioning the queer self as dialogic and communal. A diversion from the tendency of queer nineteenth-century writers to foreground the queer subject as solitary, unique, and displaced, Symonds continues to demonstrate a progressive and unorthodox conception of the male homosexual self.

Reading the Self: Poetry and Queer Self-Formation

Many years before John Addington Symonds turned to writing his own verse as a means of expressing his 'deepest self', the importance of poetry in his sexual self-understanding emerged first in the act of reading.[13] The commencement of this lifelong relationship between poetry and the formation of Symonds's sexual self is documented at the beginning of the *Memoirs* in Chapter Two – containing material which he duplicates almost verbatim in his case study for *Sexual Inversion* (his collaborative work with Havelock Ellis) – where he takes the opportunity to describe 'the first stirrings of the sexual instinct' in himself (*Memoirs*, 99). Before recalling his earliest memories of poetry and art, which appear inextricably tied to, or, indeed, partly responsible for these 'first stirrings' in his budding sexual identity, Symonds shares his belief that: 'Our earliest memories of words, poems, works of art, have great value in the study of psychical development. They indicate decisive points in the growth of personality' (*Memoirs*, 101). Thus, in a critical analysis of Symonds's intertextual selves and the function of poetry in his *Memoirs*, one need not rely merely on conjecture to assert the significance of poetry in the development of his sexual self, as Symonds himself explicitly recognises the immense value of one's early interactions with 'words, poems, [and] works of art'. Such an assessment of the importance of Symonds's engagements with poetry in his sexual self-construction aligns with recent scholarship on late Victorian sexual identities, such as Dustin Friedman's *Before Queer Theory: Victorian Aestheticism and the Self* (2019), which claims that for queer aesthetes such as Michael Field and Oscar Wilde, 'art could

[13] Symonds to Horatio Forbes Brown (November 13, 1881), in *Letters*, II (1968), p. 708; Symonds to Dr George C. Wilkinson (December 26, 1881), in *Letters*, II (1968), p. 723.

be crucial for gaining sexual self-knowledge'.[14] As such, in this brief quasi-sexological interlude, which directly follows the opening chapter of the text, Symonds introduces his sexual and textual selves as indivisible from one another and equally contingent on the acts of reading and writing poetry.

Among his juvenile engagements with the poetic form, Symonds specifically recalls the very first poem that struck his incipient sexual self: 'the first English poem which impressed me deeply – as it has, no doubt, impressed thousands of boys – was Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*. […] It gave form, ideality and beauty to my previous erotic visions' (*Memoirs*, 101). Outside the realm of the written text, then, poetry was consumed by Symonds in his childhood and beyond as it served as one of very few modes of queer representation in his own cultural moment. Though *Venus and Adonis* of course centres around the potential of a heterosexual romance between its two titular characters, in the adolescent Adonis, Symonds witnesses for the first time an image of idealised masculine beauty that counters the coarseness of the erotic visions he was subject to in his youth. While in his erotic dreams, which he details in his own case study for *Sexual Inversion*, he 'imagined himself the servant of several adult naked sailors' and 'crouched between their thighs and called himself their dirty pig', upon reading *Venus and Adonis* Symonds was able to liberate his conception of sexuality from what appears to be a mixture of confused sexual urges, a potentially masochistic proclivity, and internalised homophobia.[15] Yet, as well as recognising Adonis as an idealistic object of desire that contrasted the illusory sailors, Symonds's sexual self-conception is transformed by imaginatively inserting himself into the story of the poem. Despite identifying with Adonis 'in some confused way', presumably because in the poem he is immune to the charms of female beauty, Symonds primarily envisions himself as Venus: 'She brought into relief the overwhelming attraction of masculine adolescence and its proud inaccessibility. […] I dreamed of falling back like her upon the grass, and folding the quick-panting lad in my embrace' (*Memoirs*, 101). Positioning himself in the place of Venus is perhaps the logical imaginative leap for a young man attracted not to women but to other men.

[14] Friedman, *Before Queer Theory*, p. 2.

[15] Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds, *Sexual Inversion: A Critical Edition*, ed. by Ivan Crozier (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), p. 143.

This section of Symonds's *Memoirs*, which deals with the notable influence of poems such as *Venus and Adonis* and others that he read as a boy (those which featured 'certain male characters' he was attracted to), has a dual function within the broader structure of the text.[16] In addition to providing a useful insight into the beginnings of Symonds's sexual evolution, Symonds's choice to essentially begin his *Memoirs* with reflections on the earliest poems that shaped his sexual self-understanding positions this section as the first act in a narrative of self-revelation built around the textual arrangement of the various impactful poetic works he read in his lifetime. Across the *Memoirs*, Symonds assembles the poets and poems he encountered in the different stages of his life as a means of tracing his sexual development. Thus, the structural composition of the text demonstrates that poetry was not only instrumental in Symonds's sexual self-construction through acts of reading and composing poems throughout his life, but also through assembling poems in his attempt to retrospectively record this life in the *Memoirs*. In Oliver Buckton's discussion of self-revelation in Victorian autobiography, effective use is made of the works of Philippe Lejeune and Linda H. Peterson, both of whom share the view that, in Buckton's words, 'autobiographical discourse is instrumental in shaping subjectivity and self-consciousness, rather than being merely the expression of a pre-existing identity'.[17] Assuming this theoretical stance, the arrangement and discussion of specific poetic works in the *Memoirs* is therefore as integral to the continual evolution of Symonds's sexual identity as his actual reading of them many years before. By shaping the delineation of his identity around certain poetic milestones in his autobiographical endeavour, Symonds thus flaunts his ability to mould and transform his sexual self, revealing yet another radical underpinning to his textual construction of sexuality – the plausible self-malleability of the queer subject in the nineteenth century, which for Symonds himself was largely granted by poetry.

[16] Ellis and Symonds, *Sexual Inversion*, p. 143.

[17] Oliver Buckton, *Secret Selves: Confession and Same-Sex in Victorian Autobiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 86; Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed. by Paul John Eakin and trans. by Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1989), p. 192; Linda H. Peterson, *Victorian Autobiography: The Tradition of Self-Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 2.

As the *Memoirs* progresses beyond Symonds's boyhood, then, more of these impactful poetic works emerge as significant markers in the concurrent progression of his sexual and textual identities. One such work is William Johnson Cory's *Ionica*, which, unlike the heterosexual narrative of Shakespeare's *Venus and Adonis*, eroticises the male from the perspective of another man and foregrounds male-male bonds by appropriating the ancient Greek model of pederasty (the culturally sanctioned attachment of an older and a younger man). Published anonymously in 1858, Cory's collection of verse was addressed to a 'young man, since identified as a former student Charles Wood, later Lord Halifax', and some years later in 1872, Cory would 'resign from Eton in disgrace' on account of his intimate relationships with students.[18] Symonds first read *Ionica* as an undergraduate when he was gifted by a copy by his Oxford professor, John Conington, whom according to Symonds in the *Memoirs*, similarly 'sympathized with romantic attachments for boys' (*Memoirs,* 170). Though Symonds does not quote directly from *Ionica* in the *Memoirs*, he writes of Cory's collection: 'that volume of verse, trifling as it may appear to casual readers, went straight to my heart and inflamed my imagination' (*Memoirs*, 170). Again, Symonds highlights the distinction he identifies between himself (together with other homosexual men) and the 'casual' reader. The 'casual' reader is therefore euphemistic for what would most straightforwardly be defined as the heterosexual reader, and Symonds's use of the term suggests that the illustration of same-sex desire in poetry such as Cory's, coded as it was through language and motifs evocative of ancient Greece, was only perceptible at the time by men who identified themselves in this type of sexual or romantic model. The intensity and immediacy of the impression that Cory's poems made on Symonds can conceivably be attributed to the fact that he saw within them a kind of intimate male-male relationship that he had hitherto only been able to visualise in his imaginative queering of heterosexual romances such as that seen in *Venus and Adonis*. So strong was the influence of this representation of queer desire that it ultimately 'helped to shape Symonds's unconventional understanding of love between men', in the words of Morris B. Kaplan.[19]

[18] Morris B. Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames: Sex, Love, and Scandal in Wilde Times* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 111; 130.

[19] Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames*, p. 112.

One of the poems in the collection that was perhaps most easily distinguishable for a readership of men like Symonds as an expression, or a celebration even, of male-male love, was 'Αλιος Αμμι δεδυκε' (retitled 'A Separation' in later editions). The speaker spends much of the poem eulogising the object of his affection, but there is one point at which a more self-conscious voice emerges. Following the homoerotic musings of the speaker, the loose narrative of the poem is interrupted by a single distinctive stanza in which Cory as poet supplants the lyric voice to share his own unfulfilled wish for queer representation: 'I'd thought some poet might be born | To string my lute with silver wires' (*Ionica*, 88). The use of the past tense in 'I'd thought' confirms that such a poet, who Cory (as speaker) hoped would have given voice to the thoughts and feelings about his sexual identity that he himself was unable to wholly comprehend or articulate, never appeared. As no poet before him was able to effectively encapsulate his experience as a queer man, Cory *became* this poet, and Symonds followed this same trajectory of reading himself in the poetry of others before lifting the pen and writing himself into his own verse. Cory also gestures outward to the company of homosexual men in which he perceives himself in the closing lines of the stanza: 'At least in brighter days to come | Such men as I would not lie dumb' (*Ionica*, 88). Much like Symonds does in his reflections on reading in the *Memoirs*, Cory vows not to focus on the isolation and individuality of the queer experience, but conceives instead that the act of reading poetry for queer men is an inherently collective rather than an individual practice.

The poetry Symonds reads thus offers him a mode of understanding and self-interpretation that is otherwise inaccessible to him, supplying him with the necessary tools to build a lexicon of queer desire which he is able to exploit in his sexual self-formation. In this way, Symonds pre-empts Matthew Arnold's assertion in 'The Study of Poetry' (1880) that 'more and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us'.[20] For queer subjects such as Symonds in the nineteenth century, this 'turn to poetry' was a far more literal and, indeed, essential endeavour than for a vast majority of individuals who did not need to rely on poetry as a foundation for their self-conception, because they saw their emotions, desires, and sexual and romantic experiences represented and legitimised in

[20] Matthew Arnold, 'The Study of Poetry' in *Essays in Criticism: Second Series* (London: Macmillan, 1888), pp. 1-55 (p. 2).

every aspect of their culture. The textual arrangement of the *Memoirs* thus reflects that the formation of Symonds's sexual self heavily relied on reading impactful works of poetry in which he saw himself represented, but also, in a continuation of this process, on subsequently assembling these poems as a means of further shaping his sexual identity both textually and in his real life. More broadly, then, the structural composition of the *Memoirs* gestures to the importance of poetry in queer self-understanding in the late nineteenth century, and Symonds's tendency to read himself in the poetry of others as part of a figuratively collective reading experience with other homosexual men asserts the queer self as fundamentally dialogic, discursive, and diffuse.

Writing the Self: Symonds as Poet

'I am not a poet: this I know emphatically', writes John Addington Symonds in a letter to close friend and confidant Henry Graham Dakyns in 1864, rejecting the title of poet despite a relentless literary pursuit that saw him write and publish a mass of poems throughout his life.[21] This contradiction is characteristic of Symonds's persistent crisis of identity as a writer of poetry, torn as he was between a lack of belief in his own abilities which can be partially attributed to the discouragement of his peers and those who reviewed his published works, and a simultaneous urge to 'make verse the vehicle and safety-valve for [his] tormenting occupations' (*Memoirs*, 367). Symonds was acutely aware of this polarity and acknowledges it directly in a diary entry interpolated in the *Memoirs* which shows him ultimately recognising that his deep-rooted need to express his desires in verse triumphed over any doubts he had over his literary faculties: 'Whether I am a poet or not, I am haunted by certain situations and moral tragedies which demand expression from me' (*Memoirs*, 312). Therefore, regardless of the level of creative or technical skill at work in Symonds's poems, they form an essential component of his sexual identity and the construction of this identity in his literary output. It is no great surprise, then, that Symonds's *Memoirs* – the product of an attempt to write his life as fully and frankly as possible – is pervaded by innumerable poems he composed across several decades which document the precise mood and impression of several notable episodes in his sexual self-formation. As such, contrary to the largely tepid reception given to Symonds's poetry in his own time, as well as a relative neglect of his poetic works in subsequent critical scholarship, the embedding

[21] Symonds to Henry Graham Dakyns (March 23, 1864), in *Letters*, I (1967), p. 450.

of such poems in the *Memoirs* encourages an examination of poetic intertextuality and queer self-construction, but also a reconsideration of Symonds as poet more broadly.

In his lifetime, Symonds wrote an 'estimated 1,000 poems', 776 of which have survived according to Ian Venables.[22] Symonds published four stand-alone volumes of original poetry in total: *Many Moods* (1878), *New and Old* (1880), *Animi Figura* (1882), and *Vagabunduli Libellus* (1884), but also wrote, in Venables' assessment, '232 poems that appear in 15 privately typeset booklets' (some of which were also featured in one of the published volumes).[23] In addition, Percy L. Babington's *Bibliography* shows that between 1862 and the year of his death, 1893, Symonds made a number of contributions to periodicals such as the *Cornhill Magazine* and *The Cliftonian*, but a majority of these poems were later included in one of the four aforementioned published collections, rather than serving as separate individual works.[24] Though the privately printed pamphlets evidently evaded public criticism, the published collections were met with a number of reviews that were mildly encouraging in that they recognised Symonds's potential as a capable writer of verse, but which concluded that his poems were 'not the outcome of original creative genius', in the words of Edward Dowden.[25] Without doubt, however, the view most commonly expressed among his critics was that Symonds as poet was simply unable to contend with Symonds as cultural historian and writer of prose. By the time that Symonds had published his first collection of poems, *Many Moods*, in 1878, he had already gained a favourable reputation for his two-volume *Studies of the Greek Poets* (1873, 1876) and multi-volume *Renaissance in Italy* (1875-76). As such, reviews of Symonds's collections frequently noted that the poems were inevitably overshadowed by his works in prose. Dowden summarises this perspective in his review of *Many Moods*, claiming that 'Mr. Symonds the maker of verse has to compete with Mr. Symonds the student of Greek literature and historian of the Italian Renaissance'.[26]

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[22] Ian Venables, 'Appendix: Symonds's Peccant Poetry' in *John Addington Symonds: Culture and the Demon Desire*, ed. by John Pemble (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 178-185 (p. 178).

[23] Ibid., p. 178.

[24] Percy L. Babington, *Bibliography of the Writings of John Addington Symonds* (London: John Castle, 1925), pp. 131-212.

[25] Edward Dowden, '*Many Moods* (Book Review)', *The Academy*, 14 (1878), 103-104 (p. 103).

[26] Dowden, '*Many Moods* (Book Review)', p. 103.

Symonds repeatedly avows his confidence in the ability of these poems to communicate most accurately the events and emotions they explore, even more so than that which the autobiographical form will allow. For instance, in his effort to meticulously recreate his experience of first love and the emotional turbulence of his infatuation with Willie Dyer, Symonds invokes the poetry he wrote at the time in order to fill the inevitable gaps induced by breaks in his memory, or a struggle to express himself as articulately in autobiographical prose. He explains that these poems 'portray the state of [his] mind at that epoch better than [he] can now describe it', and that 'no autobiographical resumption of facts after the lapse of twenty-five years is equal in veracity to such contemporary records' (*Memoirs*, 178). While Symonds here attributes his inclusion of the poems to their temporal immediacy to 'the state of [his] mind' at that specific epoch, elsewhere in his writing it becomes clear that he also chooses to intersperse poetry throughout the *Memoirs* because the form of the lyric poem itself affords him certain advantages in the depiction of his sexual identity. In a letter written to Horatio Forbes Brown about his collection *Vagabunduli Libellus*, Symonds confesses: 'I do not suppose I have ever expressed my deepest self so nakedly before as I have here', and in a similar letter to Dr George C. Wilkinson, he is more direct: 'The last nine months have been spent by me in a sustained effort to express my deepest self in poetry'.[27] Thus, in order to circumvent his struggle to communicate the intricacies of his emotional past and represent the supposed truth of his life in the autobiographical form, Symonds calls on his poetic voice to offer a seemingly authentic account of key moments in the development of his sexual self-knowledge. Any reading of the ostensible veracity of the *Memoirs* must, of course, take into account the slippages inherent in any form of life writing between autobiography and fiction, as well as the 'radical ambiguity' of the term 'autobiography' itself, which Max Saunders explores in *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (2010).[28] Though Symonds's insertion of poems written contemporaneously with the events he discusses somewhat resolves this ambiguity by removing the questionable reliability of the author's memory that is typical of retrospective life narratives, his

[27] Symonds to Horatio Forbes Brown (November 13, 1881), in *Letters*, II (1968), p. 708; Symonds to Dr George C. Wilkinson (December 26, 1881), in *Letters*, II (1968), p. 723.

[28] Max Saunders, *Self-Impression: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 4.

comments above and the textual composition of the *Memoirs* actually encourage a fluid and ambiguous understanding of autobiography that recognises the possibility of writing oneself in multiple generic modes (most importantly, in this case, poetry).

When Phyllis Grosskurth made the decision to excise what she deemed to be Symonds's 'execrable poetry' in her 1984 published edition of the *Memoirs*, she was not, therefore, merely removing some inconsequential superfluous material, she was severing a substantial part of Symonds's sexual self from his life narrative.[29] Thankfully, Regis restores most of this material in her critical edition of the *Memoirs* in order to remain faithful to the heterogeneity of the text. As a result, the text functions, in essence, as a dialogue between Symonds's intertextual selves – dispersed amongst autobiographical prose, letters, diaries, and verse – rather than conforming to the more established monologic form of life writing akin to Lejeune's oft-cited definition of the autobiography as a 'retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality'.[30] In this sense, the text is more closely aligned with Brian Loftus's examination of the queer autobiography, which Loftus claims renders 'the unitary "I" plural and tautological [and] refuses the binary oppositions constructed by the "I" – spoken/silenced, subject/abject, symbolic/unrepresentable'.[31] Without a singular, stable referent, Symonds's "I" is scattered between multiple forms and voices, signalling an exploration of queer subjectivity that is constantly evolving and transforming, and collectively contributing to the textual formation of his composite sexual identity.

Though Symonds does not entirely disregard the autobiographical conventions demarcated by Lejeune, as he frequently provides retrospective reflections in prose on the poems he wrote when he was younger, commenting on the real-life experiences that motivated their composition, the juxtaposition and occasional overlap of Symonds's disparate selves is most apparent when full poems or extracts are inserted into the *Memoirs*. In Chapter Seven, Symonds relies almost entirely on poetry to recount the Alfred Brooke episode (another of his romantic attachments),

[29] Phyllis Grosskurth, 'Foreword' in *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds*, ed. by Grosskurth (London: Hutchinson, 1984), p. 11.

[30] Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, p. 4.

[31] Brian Loftus, 'Speaking Silence: The Strategies and Structures of Queer Autobiography', *College Literature*, 24 (1997), 28-44 (p. 32).

demonstrating that the idiosyncratic textual capabilities of the lyric poem allow him to most effectively capture the thoughts and feelings associated with his experiences of homosexual love. Following a fleeting introduction to Brooke in his autobiographical prose, which serves structurally as a preface to the dominant textual authority of this chapter – poetry – Symonds quickly turns to the first of several intertexts, an extract from a poem (transcribed in the *Memoirs* manuscript) that he presents as 'truly' written out of his 'own heart's experience' (*Memoirs*, 194). The extract, drawn from one of his privately printed poems, 'Genius Amoris Amari Visio' (which in English translates to 'The Genius of Greek Love'), in Symonds's own words dwells on the 'doom of anguish and disappointment and useless longing' experienced by men who loved men in his 'modern age' (*Memoirs*, 194).

The entire section of the poem that Symonds transcribes is comprised of rhyming couplets, with the exception of just one pair of lines that deviates from this pattern: 'The keen divisions of quick thoughts, the void | Of outstretched arms, the subtle suicide' (*Memoirs*, 194). As the sole divergence from the consistent rhyme scheme – particularly one that consists of simple, regular pairs which regiment the rhyme – these lines function as a jarring interruption of the rhythm of the poem thus far. This rhythmic interjection mimics the 'void' referenced at the end of the first line and serves as a structural reflection of the inevitable detachment between himself and Brooke. The cultural conditions of their historical moment prohibit them from resolving their love and forming a legitimate pair, just as Symonds prevents these two lines from uniting in a single rhyme as seen elsewhere in the extract. Here, then, we see Symonds grappling with what John Holmes recognises as 'the paradox that the resolution he seeks [in poetry] requires unity and holism, while the language in which he has to express it can only produce division and a lack of completeness'.[32] Poetry thus presents its own difficulties for Symonds in his effort to articulate his sexual identity, but it remains nonetheless a more effective space to work through and play with these structural and linguistic obstacles than the less experimental prose sections of his *Memoirs*. In the extract, the break in rhyme also assigns emphasis to the content of the two lines themselves, especially the final word of each line, 'void' and 'suicide', frankly encapsulating the 'doom of anguish and disappointment' that is symptomatic of the

[32] John Holmes, *Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Late Victorian Sonnet Sequence: Sexuality, Belief and the Self* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 123.

queer male experience in the nineteenth century. Such rhythmic and structural subtleties are unique to poetry and are not easily transferrable to the prose used in conventional life writing, hence Symonds's tendency to foreground his poems in the *Memoirs* as a means of painting an accurate portrait of his experiences and ensuing emotional responses to them.

Subsequent to this poetry extract, Symonds introduces yet another text external to the *Memoirs* – a 'prose dithyramb' which outlines the various acts of the Symonds/Brooke relationship, followed by a second version converted into blank verse which he also inserts into the chapter in full. Again, Symonds's faith in the advantages of the poetic form for constructing his narrative of sexual self-revelation is clear, as this blank verse poem records the exact same experience as the prose account that immediately precedes it, yet he feels a need to include both. These choices of narrative construction beg the question, in addition to its rhythmic intricacies, what are the particular features of the lyric poem that encourage Symonds to rely on it as the most productive arena for sexual self-delineation? As a literary mode specifically concerned with the expression of the interior emotional mechanisms of the self, or in Symonds's own words, a realm in which the poet sings 'subjectively, introspectively, obeying impulses from nature and the world', the lyric poem demands a depth of introspection incomparable to any other form, including the autobiography itself.[33] To explain this further, and to elucidate Symonds's attraction to the lyric mode, Marion Thain's study *The Lyric Poem and Aestheticism: Forms of Modernity* (2016) and her invocation of Hegel's theorisation of the lyric are particularly valuable. The necessary 'alienation' of oneself in the lyric, according to Hegel's definition, is achieved when the poet 'discloses his self-concentrated heart, opens his eyes and ears, raises purely dull feeling into vision and ideas, and gives words and language to this enriched inner life so that as inner life it may find expression'.[34] Using Hegel's conception of the lyric, Thain theorises further that 'the nineteenth-century lyric subject provided an experimental space in which relationships of identity and difference could be productively negotiated' – an ideal

[33] John Addington Symonds, 'A Comparison of Elizabethan with Victorian Poetry', in *Essays: Speculative and Suggestive*, 2 vols (London: Chapman and Hall, 1890), II, p. 243.

[34] G. W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art: Vol 2*, ed. and trans. T. M. Knox, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), II, p. 1111.

space, therefore, for a negotiation of queer selves such as that which Symonds constructs in the *Memoirs*.[35]

Conversely, the autobiographical form does not always provide such room for experimentation or the creative negotiation of queer subjectivity. This is demonstrated by Symonds's self-conscious reflections on the autobiographical form and his style of prose in the *Memoirs*, which suggest that he understands the autobiography to be a less emotionally subjective testimony of the central events in his life. It seems, then, that Symonds identifies a clear generic distinction between poetry and autobiography – the former allows for the authentic formation and expression of self as it emerges from the moods and emotions induced by key episodes in his sexual life, while the latter is useful for retrospectively analysing this self, by utilising a knowledge of sexology and scientific discourse that was largely gathered in the years immediately preceding, and during, the composition of the *Memoirs*. This distinction is evident in the Brooke episode discussed above, and Heike Bauer observes a clear linguistic discrepancy between the poetry extract from 'Genius Amoris Amari Visio' and the evaluation that follows. Bauer notes that the 'adult Symonds interprets his desire for Alfred Brooke in a prose commentary that contrasts the naturalness and innocence of his love with an account of the 'illness' that overcame him' after his erotic impulse toward Brooke remained unsatisfied.[36] Bauer continues by explaining that the 'symptoms' Symonds describes such as an 'aching brain and overwrought nerves' and a 'tyranny of the flesh' are 'borrowed from the language of Victorian discourses around nervous illness and sexual health'.[37] Though reflecting on his own individual experiences and the physical and psychological impacts they had on him, adopting the pragmatic vocabulary of scientific discourses drives a slight subjective distance between Symonds and the events he recalls, hence the importance of the more emotionally literate poetry that is incorporated into the text.

Interestingly, however, despite their formal differences, in the *Memoirs*, autobiography and lyric are united by a 'universalising impulse' that Hegel, Thain, and

[35] Marion Thain, *The Lyric Poem and Aestheticism: Forms of Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 187.

[36] Heike Bauer, *English Literary Sexology: Translations of Inversion, 1860-1930* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 63.

[37] Ibid., p. 63.

Symonds himself specifically identify as a defining feature of the lyric.[38] Paraphrasing Hegel, Thain explains that in the nineteenth century, this impulse 'enables a subjectivity that both is and is not personal; a lyric poet that 'both is and is not himself'.[39] Similar to Symonds's experience as a reader of poetry – relating to and reading himself in works by poets such as Shakespeare and Cory, whilst simultaneously recognising such works as reflective of a more universal queer experience not unique to himself – Symonds as a writer of poetry assumes this same duality. In an essay of his own, Symonds writes that the lyric poet may 'give the form of universality to his experience, creating magic mirrors wherein all men shall see their own hearts reflected and glorified without violation of reality or truth'.[40] This practice is particularly significant in the context of the queer subject, who in the nineteenth century was most often forced to look to forms of art and literature for self-representation and expression, and in Friedman's estimation, to gain important 'sexual self-knowledge'.[41] When Symonds writes in 'Genius Amoris Amari Visio', for instance, of 'All the sterile years, | The vain expense of salt-draining tears', he is at once expressing the emotional torment arising from a very specific moment in his own life (the Brooke relationship) and speaking more broadly of homosexual love in the nineteenth century as a fruitless and futile form of desire (*Memoirs*, 194).

In the prose segments of the *Memoirs*, Symonds is similarly motivated by this 'universalising impulse' and attempts to strike this same fine balance between recounting the particularities of his life as a solitary, individual subject, and envisioning the queer self as discursive and collective. He shares in the preface his hope that among the future readers of his autobiographical project, 'a fellow creature will feel some thrill of pity' in reading the record of his life (*Memoirs*, 60). Several such references to his so-called 'fellow creatures' are scattered through the text from beginning to end, where in the penultimate chapter Symonds writes: 'Alas, while writing this, I must perforce lay the pen aside, and think how desolate are the conditions under which men constituted like me live and love' (*Memoirs*, 502). Nonetheless, the linguistic and structural rigidity of Symonds's autobiographical prose does not compare to the creative liberties

[38] Thain, *The Lyric Poem*, p. 179.

[39] Ibid., p. 179; Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 1121.

[40] Symonds, 'Is Poetry at Bottom a Criticism of Life?' in *Essays* (1890), II, p. 163.

[41] Friedman, *Before Queer Theory*, p. 2.

granted by the lyric poem in the literary construction of his sexual identity. Thus, while both forms are entered into a creative exchange with one another in the *Memoirs* – a formal encounter that is arguably necessary for producing the richest possible portrait of the self – my assertion is that the autobiographical mode, for Symonds, ultimately serves as a convenient textual skeleton to string together the phases of his sexual life as told through his engagements with, and writing of, poetry. The radical, then, can be identified in Symonds's assertion that poetry occupies a privileged position in the process of sexual self-formation for queer subjects, and, as an extension, his understanding that poetry displays (and somewhat facilitates) the queer self to be collectively experienced and articulated, as opposed to existing as an individual, alienated identity.

Conclusion

In a passage marked for deletion in the *Memoirs*, Symonds writes, 'we are, all of us, composite beings', gesturing to a foundational notion of his autobiographical project (*Memoirs*, 188, n. 50). From this philosophy emerges a life narrative that is heterogeneous, polyphonic, and inherently radical, and the text serves as one of the most fascinating and idiosyncratic records of queer self-construction in the nineteenth century. Contrary to Symonds's mission to paint a 'perfect portrait of the man', then, the enduring allure of the *Memoirs* lies in the precise opposite: its textual imperfection (*Memoirs*, 478). Of the diverse modes deployed by Symonds throughout, this article has illustrated that poetry is the most consistent and significant textual authority in the formation of his sexual identity, revealing itself to be at the core of Symonds's life both as it was lived and as it was written. In addition to uncovering the importance of poetry in Symonds's sexual development and self-construction, as well as considering the broader ramifications of the relationship between autobiography, poetry, and how queer lives are assembled in literature, this article has thus affirmed the value of studying a vastly overlooked part of Symonds's oeuvre. The value of re-reading and reclaiming Symonds as both poet and radical, an act that is encouraged by his explicit depiction of homosexuality and the intertextual configuration of the *Memoirs*, lies not in an endorsement of his technical or creative skills as a writer of verse, but in revealing that poetry was a crucial component of both his sexual self-understanding and his notion of a communal and discursive queer experience. Considering the question

famously posed by Paul de Man – 'can autobiography be written in verse?' – one is therefore tempted to conclude that the *Memoirs* exemplifies the affirmative.[42] Yet, more than simply demonstrating that it is possible to write one's life in verse, Symonds's practice of 'poetizing' every aspect of his sexual identity and incorporating the resultant poems into his *Memoirs* suggests that, in his case, autobiography cannot be written without it.

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[42] Paul de Man, 'Autobiography as De-facement', *MLN*, 94 (1979), 919-920 (p. 920).