

Deferred Desire and Textual Consummation in
George Moore's *Memoirs of My Dead Life*:
Beyond the Pleasure Principle.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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"My thoughts run upon women," George Moore muses in *Memoirs of My Dead Life*, conceding that "we forget women for a little while when we are thinking about Art, but only for a while."¹ Art and women were "woven together" in his work,² and women as the object and vehicle of aesthetic contemplation—the driving force behind processes of remembering—are the leitmotifs of Moore's autobiographical reveries of 1906, the confessions no longer of a young but a middle-aged man. That women were key to the artistic self-construction of this "bad boy of English literature"³ was proverbial in the Anglo-Irish author's lifetime. George Bernard Shaw recalled how the youthful Moore was "always telling stories about himself and women... Everyone used to laugh at George and no one believed him, but ... he was not in the least put out ... but just said: 'Don't interrupt me,' and went on as before."⁴ What might have been pardonable in the young man about town appeared indefensible in the mature, established man of letters: Yeats referred to his one-time friend and collaborator as "the old lecher from Mayo,"⁵ and the short story writer George Egerton—though herself attracting censure for her sensually suggestive fiction—portrayed him as a "white-headed bald-faced ram with the lascivious leer of a dirty old buck-goat."⁶ In "Elegy on Any Lady, by George Moore" (1916) Max Beerbohm caricatured Moore's habit of talking about his conquests—telling but not kissing, as Susan Mitchell notoriously put it⁷—as akin to literary necrophilia by depicting him as a cheerful mourner ruminating at the sight of a tombstone: "That she adored me as the most / Adorable of males / I think I may safely boast / Dead women tell no tales."⁸ "Vague Lyric by G. M.," a scatological four-liner with which Beerbohm **[End Page 337]** annotated his copy of Moore's third edition of *Memoirs of My Dead Life* (1921) is even less complimentary.⁹

Yet to female readers, as contemporary accounts and Moore's correspondence indicate, his portrayal of women was often marked by great sensitivity. Faced with Moore's charm and charisma, many were captivated by his "astoundingly interesting," witty and vibrant

personality;¹⁰ some rediscovered themselves in Moore's fiction to the point of self-identifying as "one of your women."¹¹ Olive Schreiner felt, temporarily at least, so "entranced" by Moore that a disgruntled John Harris decided to drop her.¹² Even those who were assigned a scurrilous place in *Memoirs of My Dead Life* still singled out his "genial and tender characteristics."¹³ His avowed fascination for what in *Confessions of a Young Man* (1886) he defined as the "feminine, morbid, perverse"¹⁴ appears to have held considerable appeal for women readers too. As Adrian Frazier observes, female correspondents were able to enjoy the thrill of playing "naughty young women ... teasing the imagination of their favorite author" without running the risk of compromising themselves—if, that is, Moore did not proceed to publish their letters.¹⁵ Sex in the mind and on paper was his element,¹⁶ and there is much to suggest it was appreciated. Like *Evelyn Innes* (1898)—the novel which, with reference to an epistolary romance, he called "one of the most powerful literary aphrodisiacs ever written"¹⁷—*Memoirs of My Dead Life* is energized by the slippage between sex and text: sex recollected in tranquility generates text, and this text ultimately comes to afford a greater measure of pleasure than the original experience. The erotic gambit is aestheticized as literary memory (the recollection of a lover or affair as translated into literature). At the same time it is also dialogized in a direct address to the reader: the writerly recapitulation of erotic drama serves to advance the seduction of the reader.

It is this metafictional conflation of woman and art, memory and literature, lover and reader that is the subject of this article. Its object is to examine Moore's aesthetics of desire by means of undertaking a...

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