Open Secrets and Hidden Truths

Wilde and Freud

Sean Latham (Contributor Webpage)

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Abstract and Keywords
By the end of the 19th century, the realist novel’s distinctive mode of organizing social, historical, and aesthetic knowledge came under increasing pressure from the roman à clef. Amidst a rapidly expanding, mass-mediated celebrity, this long suppressed genre abruptly emerged from the margins of culture to play a key role in the founding texts of modernism. Using the work of Oscar Wilde and Sigmund Freud, this chapter contends that these two figures help initiate the onset of modernism precisely by turning toward the roman à clef, releasing narrative powers they quickly realized were well beyond their control. Unlike most of his predecessors, Freud regularly adopted the conventions of the roman à clef for his case studies, using this device as a way to mask (and sometimes mutilate) the identities of his often affluent patients while exploring the fraught boundary between fact and fiction in their psychic lives. Wilde, too, exploits these same ambiguities throughout his work. Like Freud, he attempts to cultivate and to exploit a central, organizing secret in his work that articulates the provisional identities and social practices hovering imprecisely between history and the novel.

*Keywords:* Sigmund Freud, Oscar Wilde, Dora, Dorian Gray, modernism, roman à clef, theory of novel, psychoanalysis, history of psychology
For the roman à clef, celebrity culture acts as a catalytic medium, activating the form’s distinctive energies by transferring interpretive power to ever more widely dispersed audiences. Private lives quickly become public properties so that, as Sewell Stokes argued, the boundary between gossip and the novel begins to dissolve. This accounts, in large part, for the roman à clef’s reputation as a degraded form since, rather than relating the special truths of the realist novel, it comes perilously close to something like reportage or even social stenography. Even when treating it seriously, critics still lament the fact that it draws from the stagnant shallows of actual events rather than from the deep wells of the creative imagination. Reviewing Evelyn Toynton’s 2000 roman à clef, Modern Art, the novelist Francine Prose laments in the New York Times Book Review “how frequently we will be disturbed and jarred awake from the dream of art by the nagging, inescapable question of reality: How much of this story is true?”¹ She then goes on to praise the book as a success, but only because the author writes “intelligently” enough to “transcend the limitations of the roman à clef.” That is, we eventually become absorbed enough in the veiled portraits Toynton draws of Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock to quit worrying about anything so déclassé as reality and become fully immersed in a world rich and intelligent enough to approach the status of realist fiction. The paradox here is obvious and reveals just how badly dulled the once “anarchic” force of the novel has become. Despite its immense incorporative powers, a novel can be judged a critical success only when it stops just short of actually creating portraits of real people, when it manages fully to suppress the very question that underwrote its very rise three centuries earlier: “How much of this story is true?”
Such a question inevitably introduces the “extreme skepticism” McKeon claims the novel barely repressed and which assumed a new sense of urgency as the nineteenth century drew to a close. Writers, readers, critics, publishers, even medical scientists and ultimately jurists all found themselves increasingly caught up in a renewed debate about the limits of fiction, as the roman à clef once again emerged from the shadows to unsettle the aesthetic, ethical, and legal consensus underwriting the novel. Initially, writers were drawn to certain elements of the form because they offered a way to reconfigure history and fiction and thereby challenge the realist novel’s claims to a self-sufficient autonomy. This generated a new and heady kind of social agency: a means of engaging the public sphere not through political discourse, but rather through emergent networks of celebrity culture and mass mediation. After all, a book trading on an author’s fame and social connections could spark political scandals, foment lawsuits, and sometimes make or shatter individual reputations. The roman à clef’s unique ability to rework the opposition between fact and fiction, furthermore, extended its influence well beyond questions of aesthetics. As we will see, early sexologists deliberately employed its structures in order to publish their revolutionary studies, making the genre itself an integral part of what Judith Ryan calls “the simultaneous emergence of modern psychology and modernist literature.”

The anonymous case history, in fact, emerges in psychiatric discourse at almost the same moment that Oscar Wilde and others begin to experiment with the roman à clef. Science and art alike cast about for a set of narrative tools capable of generating new modes of knowledge by productively renegotiating the boundary between fact and fiction.
But these early innovators also failed to grasp the infectious nature of the roman à clef as a social form: its uniquely disruptive ability to transfer interpretive authority from writers to readers. In borrowing particular narrative elements—like openly encoded names and “conditional fictionality”—these texts energized the genre as a whole. Early cases studies, which first concealed the names of patients behind pseudonyms, became not just scientific documents, but gossip sheets that the scandalized public sought to decipher. Far from protecting an individual’s identity, in other words, the changed names in such works aroused a forensic curiosity that echoed through diverse networks of reading and reception. Thus Havelock Ellis found himself redacting one of his most important works to calm the fears of an anxious family, while Freud himself grew so frustrated that he eventually abandoned the form altogether. The habits of reading reactivated by the roman à clef’s resurgence further enabled the transformation of a novel like Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* into a secretly encoded account of its author’s life. Although it actually contains very little real biographical detail, the book nevertheless acquired a troubling agency of its own that emanated precisely from its retroactive reception as a roman à clef encoding the author’s own misdeeds. Wilde himself may have initially invited such a misreading, but he too failed to understand just how powerfully the form’s “conditional fictionality” could rewrite the facts of his own life. Like other writers at the end of the nineteenth century, he painfully learned that within an emergent mass culture, the roman à clef was less a rigidly defined genre than a pragmatic social form that could be called suddenly into existence with sometimes dangerous results.
Deeply immersed in a burgeoning celebrity culture increasingly invested in the public trade on private scandal, the roman à clef proliferated wildly in the 1890s and played an essential role in modernism’s deliberately self-historicizing rupture with the past. Robert Hichens, Marie Corelli, and George du Maurier all exploited the form in books that sold millions of copies to readers eager to savor its genuine comic appeal while also seeking out its latent, gossipy secrets. This initial round of experimentation began with Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in 1891 and quickly reached full flower in E. F. Benson’s *Dodo, a Detail of the Day*. Published in 1893, *Dodo* offers a portrait of the wealthy socialite Margot Tennant, an attractive and well-connected woman who eventually married English Prime Minister H. H. Asquith. The book ran promptly to twelve editions and made Benson—himself the son of the Archbishop of Canterbury—an instant celebrity. The Prince of Wales addressed Margot as “Miss Dodo” at a royal ball and, according to Benson’s biographer, Lord Rosebery advised Asquith when his engagement was announced “to read *Dodo* if you have not already done so—there’s a great deal of truth in it.” Typically treated (if treated at all) as nothing more than a faddish society entertainment, *Dodo* initiated what would become a decades-long experiment with the roman à clef and inspired a raft of imitators suddenly eager to transform their social knowledge into financial success. Not only did Benson’s book attempt to rework the boundary between fact and fiction, it also helped legitimate the sorts of reading practices the realist novel sought to suppress. As a consequence of the roman à clef’s infectiousness, the public increasingly began to treat a wide variety of other books as potentially covert ciphers concealing scandal and intrigue that—with the proper gossipy knowledge—could be expertly decoded.
Such innovative modes of both reading and writing, however, were by no means confined solely to the novel or even to the aesthetic sphere. At just the moment (p.46) Benson, Hichens, and Wilde began their experiments, so too did an entirely different set of writers, themselves seeking to renegotiate the fact–fiction binary—albeit from the other side of this divide. In the emerging fields of psychology and sexology, Havelock Ellis, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Josef Breuer, and Sigmund Freud all exploited elements of the roman à clef to develop a new and deeply influential genre of scientific writing: the anonymous case study. Its “conditional fictionality” and aesthetics of detail permitted them to describe authoritatively the most intimate details of their patients’ lives while nevertheless seeming to protect them from public scrutiny. Eschewing statistics and aggregated data, these researchers instead published dazzlingly scandalous stories about the sexual practices, intimate secrets, and private dreams of their patients. Paradoxically, to lend their accounts the authority of fact, they cast them as romans à clef: accounts of real events in which only the names had been changed. Indeed, unlike Dodo or Trilby, these studies begin by explicitly articulating the need to develop a new narrative technology capable of expressing a still emergent knowledge about the mind. Here, for example, is the second paragraph of Breuer and Freud’s foundational work, Studies on Hysteria:

We have appended ... a series of case histories, the selection of which could not unfortunately be determined on purely scientific grounds. Our experience is derived from private practice in an educated and literate social class, and the subject matter with which we deal often touches upon our patients’ most intimate lives and histories. It would be a grave breach of confidence to publish material of this kind, with the risk of the patients being recognized and their acquaintances becoming informed of facts which were confided only to a physician. It has therefore been impossible for us to make use of some of the most instructive and convincing of our observations.5
As tantalizing as any roman à clef, this passage insists on the ambiguity of what follows, promising simultaneously to reveal and withhold illuminating secrets. The case history itself thus seeks to reconfigure the news/novel divide, deploying narrative techniques typically reserved for the novel in order to develop both a new kind of knowledge and the forms necessary to communicate its hermetic contents to a wider public. Yet these innovative experiments also proved unexpectedly disruptive, quickly escaping the control of their authors to assume an unruly social life of their own.

Linking Freud to Wilde through the circuit of genre, this chapter argues that the roman à clef reemerges in the waning years of the nineteenth century not as a self-consciously deployed form, but as an initially disordered array of narrative (p.47) technologies for creating new configurations of fiction and fact. For Oscar Wilde, these new tools offered a way to challenge the limits of an ossified Victorian realism by integrating art and politics as well as public and private life, and he uses the roman à clef’s “conditional fictionality” to articulate emergent sexual identities. Freud sought to use these same narrative techniques to tap the secrets of the unconscious. Concealing names and revealing details behind a fictional screen permitted him to publicize and even to invent new kinds of knowledge about the most intimate private behavior. Neither Wilde nor Freud set out explicitly to write romans à clef, but both found that the narrative form they had each adapted possessed a disquieting agency of its own. Indeed, their infamous popularity helped usher in the regimes of reading and interpretation that quickly facilitated the rise of the roman à clef as a distinctive modernist form. Freud indignantly abandoned the anonymous case study—the very form he helped pioneer—when he found that readers pursued the secret identities of his patients as ardently as they did the hidden meaning of dreams. Wilde at first believed himself more fully in command of his materials and openly invited readers to see The Picture of Dorian Gray as a moralistic tale about the dangers of confusing art and life. As was the case with Freud, however, he failed to grasp the potential hazards emanating from the genre’s inherent infectiousness—its powerful ability to transfer interpretive authority from writers to mass-mediated networks of reception. As a result, Wilde found himself in the dock, tragically defending himself from a genre he could not fully control.
Case Histories
In *Axel’s Castle*, that early study of a still emergent high modernism, Edmund Wilson draws a clear line through Marcel Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu* linking the roman à clef to the psychoanalytic case study: “Superb as are the qualities of objective dramatic imagination which have gone into” the book, he writes, “it was never quite disengaged from his sick-room.” After lavishing further praise on the text, he can’t help but pause and ask, is Proust “telling us his own case history with symbols?” The answer of course is both yes and no, but the question captures an underlying suspicion of what Martin Jay calls “the specter of psychologism” in modernism. For Wilson and other theorists seeking to articulate a new aesthetics, this ghostly presence carries with it “connotations of reductionism, contamination, and relativism” since it threatens to entwine author and character too closely, reviving the eighteenth-century skepticism about the novel’s autonomy. It drove critics like Wilson and T. S. Eliot to embrace instead an impersonal formalism capable of preserving aesthetics from the taint of historical and individual contingency. The roman à clef, however, is an intensely personal genre, its pleasures and powers dependent, to some degree, both upon celebrity authors and what Arthur Bauman called in *The Fortnightly Review* “a taste for indecent curiosity in the private lives of unimportant neighbors.” Indeed, this helps explains why it dropped so precipitously out of New Critical accounts of the period. But the genre’s insistent exploration of private life entangles it with those strands of modernist cultural production that sought to make an aesthetic of personality itself. Proust, Joyce, and even Freud wove their own lives insistently through their own texts, blurring the boundary between fact and fiction. More even than the novel, the roman à clef offered them the narrative tools to develop this new mode of writing, providing ways of reconfiguring fact and fiction as well as public and private life. For Freud and other early innovators in the field of psychology, the genre’s ambiguity promised to extend the reach of a scientific discourse that could not otherwise breach the secrets of sexual life and the unconscious. Faced with the paradoxical need to preserve the confidentiality of their patients while nevertheless relating the most intimate of private details, they fell back on the roman à clef as a regrettably crude but seemingly necessary aid.
Surprisingly, Freud, in some of his earliest work in psychoanalysis, sounds a lot like Eliot and other modernist writers who at once lamented and embraced the end of the realist novel. Just as Eliot announces that the “narrative method” (and with it the realist novel) “ended with Flaubert and James,” so too Freud acknowledges that current psychiatric rhetoric had reached a crucial limit. The rudiments of the “talking cure” he initially developed with Breuer led to remarkable results in the case of “Anna O.,” but he immediately ran into difficulties in trying to implement them. Thus, in the opening preface to *Dora: An Analysis of a Case Study of Hysteria*, Freud begins casting about for a new way to synthesize the otherwise bewildering collection of symptoms, instances of repression, and other psychological phenomena he finds in his patient. This slim text initially casts psychoanalysis as a narrative tool necessary for restoring the psychic unity destroyed both by the case’s famous incompleteness and by the bewildering nature of the unconscious itself. “I have restored what is missing,” Freud writes, following “the example of those discoverers whose good fortune it is to bring to the light of day after their long burial the priceless though mutilated relics of antiquity.”

This restorative process, however, is inevitably artificial since it requires the analyst to invent material to fill in the gaps that plague the afflicted patient. As literary critics have long recognized, this renders “Freud … as much a novelist as an analyst” who weaves together his own fictions to fill out the facts of an individual neurosis. But *Dora*, of course, is not really a novel; it purports to be the accurate record of Freud’s sessions with a young woman named Ida Bauer conducted in the closing months of 1900, just after the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*. And while Freud may be trying to use psychoanalysis to “restore what is missing” in his ill patient, he is simultaneously trying to develop a narrative form capable of filling out the very same lacunae in his still evolving theories of hysteria and the unconscious. To do so, he resorts not to the novel, but to the roman à clef, a genre that much more effectively permits the self-conscious suturing of fiction onto fact.
As the 1905 preface to *Dora* makes clear, reading Freud’s text as a roman à clef is all too easy an exercise: “I am aware,” he laments, “that—in this town, at least—there are many physicians who (revolting though it may seem) choose to read a case history of this kind not as a contribution to the psychopathology of neuroses, but as a roman à clef designed for their private delectation” (3). Replacing Ida with “Dora,” of course, is essential to the publication of this case since it is the only way he can safely yet accurately relay the sexual secrets and traumas of a bourgeois family. But as the text enters circulation, this substitution itself undermines the very objectivity it is meant to guarantee, threatening not only his patient’s trust but his own dispassionate authority. Without publishing accurate notes or transcriptions, after all, readers can’t help but wonder what else might have been changed—wonder, that is, just where the act of fictional substitution comes to an end. Indeed, on the very first page Freud rushes to address this concern, one which had troubled a good deal of his earlier work, including *Studies in Hysteria*. He writes that “whereas before I was accused of giving no information about my patients, now I shall be accused of giving information about my patients which ought not be given” (1). This excess of intimate detail is meant here to act as a guarantor of Freud’s own objectivity and thereby delimit the study’s reception by authorizing it as genuinely scientific discourse. The more spectacular the secrets he discloses, however, the more dogged his readers become in their attempts to ferret out the real identity of the Viennese family wracked by such scandal.

As we will see in a moment, Freud helped pioneer the use of the anonymous case study, and his writings were among the very first psychological texts that substituted fictional names to convey real facts. Yet he remained deeply suspicious of this form and was prescient about its potential instability once passed along to a reading public fascinated with sexual scandal. Indeed, it is somewhat surprising to realize he wrote only a few such studies himself, turning instead to increasingly more abstract works rooted primarily in theory rather than practice. Part of the problem, of course, was his own growing celebrity, which brought with it what he called “the irksome attentions of a city that focuses quite particularly on my work as a physician.” As was the case with Dora, the patients he includes in his case studies
themselves become objects of intense public scrutiny, feeding that same curiosity about “the private lives of unimportant neighbors” Baumann critiques in the *Fortnightly Review*. Fed into the mass-mediated networks generating his own fame, they too find themselves potentially transformed from psychiatric patients into international celebrities. But Freud is also concerned that the narrative elements of the roman à clef he employs ultimately threaten to distort his findings by making clinical facts and narrative fictions dangerously interdependent. One of his final case studies, “Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-Compulsive Neurosis,” makes this point explicitly: “I find the kind of distortions … to which one normally has recourse [in writing a case study] increasingly inappropriate and reprehensible. If they are only minor ones they do not fulfill their intended purpose of protecting the patient from indiscreet curiosity, and if they are more substantial then the sacrifice is too great, for they ruin our understanding of the overall logic of the case, which derives precisely from the petty realities of everyday life.”

Freud finds himself stymied here by the resurgence of the roman à clef—both as a mode of reception and as resource for his writing. To publish the most intimate secrets of his patients’ lives, he must resort to a narrative technique that allows for an artful blending of fact into fiction. Though openly acknowledging this act of concealment, however, he simultaneously finds that the very secrets he wishes to tell threaten to reveal the identity of his patients. The quotidian nature of psychopathology—the way in which the seemingly most mundane details of an individual’s life inadvertently reveal sexual trauma—threatens to turn every anonymous case history into a roman à clef.
Freud had good reason to be concerned about the unexpected social life of his work and the ability of the case study to acquire an agency of its own. The Hippocratic Oath, after all, unambiguously commands the physician to silence: “All that may come to my knowledge in the exercise of my profession or in daily commerce with men, which ought not to be spread abroad, I will keep secret and will never reveal.” Yet the history of medicine in general—and more particularly of psychiatry—turns precisely on the need to divulge the most intimate details of a patient’s life and history. Throughout the nineteenth and even early twentieth centuries, case studies generally made no attempt to preserve the anonymity of the patients, many of whom were women and often institutionalized members of the working class. James Braid, the Scottish physician and inventor of hypnotism, for example, made regular use of real names in his 1843 study, *Neurypnology; or, the Rationale of Nervous Sleep*. He records the case of “Mrs. Slater,” a thirty-three-year-old woman who loses the use of her legs after a traumatic pregnancy only to have their full function restored by hypnosis. “In recording cases,” Braid writes, “I consider it my duty to report facts as I have found them, and to make no compromise for the sake of accommodating them to the preconceived notions or prejudices of anyone.” Though he is defending himself here against the charge that hypnotism is a fraud, his rigorous adherence to “facts” plainly extends to providing not only the name of his patient but extensive details about her personal life as well. Similarly, the renowned French physician Jean-Martin Charcot, one of Freud’s own teachers, often lectured and toured with his patients, particularly “Blanche” Wittmann, who was popularly dubbed “The Queen of Hysterics.” These sessions are, in fact, the subject of a well-known 1887 painting entitled *Une leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière* by André Brouillet featuring Wittmann in the grips of a hysterical seizure. Far from protecting his patient’s privacy, he instead puts her vividly on display both for paying audiences and for the viewers of this heroic image that still hangs in the hospital.

Even as Charcot’s theatrical presentations became well-known, however, the practice of so openly breaching a patient’s confidentiality began to wane. In the December 1886 issue of *Le Revue Philosophique*, one of Freud’s most important predecessors, Pierre Janet, published an article...
about a young woman plagued by hysteria and sleepwalking. “We will designate her by the letter L.,” he writes, before going on to argue that his experiments on her reveal the existence of something “outside of consciousness” where “there is memory which persists, attention which is always awake.” This rudimentary description of the unconscious—the revelation, that is, of another kind of subjectivity operating within the patient—is itself accompanied by one of the earliest uses of a pseudonym in a case study. Just as the girl’s deeper self is hidden or obscured from her, in other words, so is her identity more effectively hidden from the reader, transforming her from a historical actor into a literary construct. Janet, moreover, was not the only one to begin experimenting with this new form for the case study. Nearly simultaneously another of Freud’s teachers, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, published his landmark study, *Psychopathia Sexualis*. A compendium of “the pathological manifestations of the sexual life,” the book contains potentially explosive materials and the preface warns that “the author saw himself compelled to chose a title understood only by the learned, and also, where possible, to express himself in *terminis technicis*.” He also chose to conceal the identities of his patients, either citing their self-narrated case-studies in the anonymous first person or using single letters as in “Case 125”: “On May 1, 1880, G., Ph.D., and a writer, was brought to the clinic for mental diseases at Graz, by the public authorities. While on his return from Italy, G. found a soldier in Graz who gave himself up to him for hire, but ultimately denounced G. to the police, because G. had openly announced his love for men” (300). Like Janet’s “L.,” this patient too finds himself suddenly entangled in a confusing configuration of secrecy and disclosure, revealing here not the operation of the unconscious mind but of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick calls the “epistemology of the closet.” He directly resists Krafft-Ebing’s attempts to diagnose him as somehow ill, prompting the physician to describe the man as cynical, while using the conventions of the roman à clef to gesture toward even more scandalous secrets: “This was the extent of G.’s disclosures, whose mental condition was certainly congenitally abnormal. As proof of this may be cited his cynicism [and] his incredible frivolity in his application of his vices to religion, in which direction we cannot follow him without overstepping the bounds set by scientific inquiry” (302). The problem here is that the patient, in his frank admission and discussion of homosexual desire,
discloses too much information, threatening to turn Krafft-Ebing’s rhetorically disciplined scientific discourse (complete with all those Latin words), into a roman à clef that trades on the power and pleasure of secrecy.

Paradoxically, then, the introduction of pseudonymous names and initials in psychological case studies leads to an excess of knowledge, this narrative device suddenly revealing new possibilities and ontologies troubling even to those who employ it. The unconscious mind (for Janet) and homosexual desire (for Krafft-Ebing) both reveal the structuring power of a central secret at the core of human subjectivity, one suddenly exposed by the narrative conventions and reading habits of the roman à clef. As a site where desire can be both addressed and disciplined, the roman à clef plays an important role in what Foucault calls the “discursive explosion” of talk about sex in the nineteenth century. Rather than leading simply to some greater revelation of truth or accuracy, however, the authors of these studies found themselves operating at an increasingly fluid boundary between fact and fiction. Seeking to reveal some deeper truth about human identity, they resorted to the conventions of narrative fiction in order to obscure their patients’ identities—both from the reader looking for scandals and even from the subjects themselves. This is particularly true of Havelock Ellis, who begins his monumental Studies in the Psychology of Sex by gratefully acknowledging those who “have furnished me with intimate personal records” and lamenting that “I cannot make my thanks more specific.” This preface candidly admits that the text functions inevitably as a kind of roman à clef, its secret identities secured behind the screen of a “conditional fictionality”: “I have tried hard to get at the facts, and, having got at the facts, to look them simply and squarely in the face. If I cannot perhaps turn the lock myself, I bring the key which can alone in the end rightly open the door: the key of sincerity” (xxviii). Ellis, of course, does possess a particular kind of interpretive key that promises (or threatens) to reveal the real identities openly hidden behind letters like “Z” and “Q.” But this same key also has the power, the preface suggests, to reveal other kinds of secrets openly hidden in the public sphere, secrets about homosexuality, sado-masochism, and auto-eroticism. Using the conventions of the roman à clef to withhold one kind of secret thus opens the possibility of exposing others as the book enters into networks of reading.
and reception beyond the control of both the author and the scientific discourse he seeks to control. The initial confusion of fact and fiction designed to protect a tantalizing anonymity quickly becomes both infectious and pervasive as the case study becomes entangled in emergent debates about the legal and moral status of such writing.

For Ellis, in particular, this attempt to use the roman à clef as a narrative tool capable of revealing “the psychology of sex” led precipitously from the exam room to the courtroom. These early volumes, in fact, have long been acknowledged as key texts in early-twentieth-century debates about both sexuality and obscenity since they led to the trial of English publisher and book-dealer George Bedborough in October 1898. He was charged with conspiring “to vitiate and corrupt the morals of the liege subjects of our Lady the Queen, to debauch and poison the minds of divers of the liege subjects of our said Lady the Queen, and to raise and create in them lustful desires” (xvii). Before what Ellis called this “epoch-making case” (xvi), however, the book had already encountered another kind of difficulty following its initial publication in Germany. For the section titled “Sexual Inversion,” Ellis had secured a number of his case studies from the English author and poet John Addington Symonds—the man who appears in the text as “Z.” He provided Ellis narratives from “many more or less distinguished inverted” as did his wife, whose own same-sex relationships were also fed into the text. In addition to these case studies, Symonds also contributed other material on the history, ethics, and culture of male–male desire. Accordingly, his name appeared alongside Ellis’s own on the title page both in this initial 1886 German edition and in the first English edition printed a decade later.
Symonds, however, had been struck down by influenza in 1893, and his literary executor, Horatio Brown, withdrew permission to publish the material at the very last moment. In the immediate wake of Oscar Wilde’s conviction, it became clear that this scientific study could all too easily be read as a roman à clef, and that Symonds’s name—though protected by that pseudonymous initial in the case studies—was nevertheless hidden too plainly in sight on the title page. The genre’s infectiousness meant that it had the potential to reveal not just “Z” but, though association, the identities of the friends, colleagues, and collaborators whose (p.54) narratives he had also recorded. Brown and the Symonds family therefore purchased and destroyed the entire initial print run, leaving Ellis to revise the text heavily, removing his coauthor’s name and the materials he had added—with the crucial exception of the case studies themselves. These remained to constitute the core of the volume on Sexual Inversion, which was published later that year. The suppression of Symonds’s name reveals just how pervasive the roman à clef and its habits had become, inviting readers to investigate the very boundary between fact and fiction that the altered names had initially been meant to secure. Ironically, by presumably enabling writers to probe more deeply into the secrets of sexuality and human identity, the use of pseudonyms simultaneously—and unexpectedly—exerted new pressures on the fact-fiction divide.
Like Ellis, Freud too quickly ran afoul of the roman à clef’s anarchic streak, its ability to assume a life of its own as a social form that cannot be fully controlled or constrained by its creator. His decision to substitute the name “Dora” for Ida Bauer is essential to the case study and to the very invention of the psychoanalytic method since “it is certain that patients would never have spoken if it had occurred to them that their admissions might possibly be put to scientific uses; and it is equally certain that to ask them themselves for leave to publish their case would be quite unavailing” (2). To relate the truth of hysteria, in other words, he has to resort to the roman à clef, consoling himself and his readers with the assurance that fact and fiction are mingled only in the name of science. In “Some Remarks on a Case of Obsessive-Compulsive Neurosis,” his anxieties about the use of this technique become even more pointed: “I cannot provide a complete treatment history because this would require too detailed an account of my patient’s circumstances. The irksome attentions of a city that focuses quite particularly on my activities as a physician preclude the possibility of any entirely faithful account.” Indeed, Freud actually published very few case studies in the course of his career, and this preface to his account of the “Ratman” suggests some of the limits his narrative experiments with genre impressed upon him. In Dora’s case, however, such concerns quickly give way to his determined efforts to root out the secrets he believes she had skillfully hidden from herself. That is, he not only employs the narrative elements of the roman à clef in writing the case history, but tries to read Dora herself as this same kind of ambiguous text—one in which the unconscious mind employs its own generic codes to tell a vital truth while nevertheless concealing its content. Just as Freud conceals the real identity of his patient, so too, he believes, does Dora conceal what he calls her “intention to be ill” (38). Getting at this suppressed intention thus requires him to develop new interpretive techniques for negotiating not only this case but the complicated (p.55) form of the roman à clef itself—a form that now shadows not only the novel but the unconscious mind as well.
As Neil Herz argues, Freud’s narrative falls afoul of what I have called the roman à clef’s infectiousness, that “thoroughgoing epistemological promiscuity in which lines ... blur between what Dora knew and what Freud knew.” This puts the case too simply, however, since the very boundaries between fact and fiction, as well as between the case study and the novel, are also at stake. In fabricating the truth of Dora’s illness, Freud weaves an increasingly elaborate fiction that he attempts to impress both on us and on the girl herself as the fact of an underlying illness. There is always the danger, however, that this story will fail, that it will be exposed as an elaborate invention rather than genuine scientific knowledge. In the text, therefore, it’s not just that the boundary between fact and fiction becomes blurred, but that Freud attempts constantly to switch the two—to avoid the inevitable “epistemological promiscuity” inherent in the case study by simply reversing the narrative’s polarity. The facts of Herr K.’s sexual abuse thus become fictions thrown up by Dora’s own unconscious as a way of concealing the deeper truth of her own sexual desires. At the end of 1900, however, Dora decided to leave treatment, thereby rejecting Freud’s analytic method and its proposed solutions to her suffering. As Jen Shelton argues, as “Freud takes his revenge on Dora by narrativizing her,” a new kind of modernist writing, “obsessed with authority,” emerges. His case study seeks to control the narrative ambiguities on which it depends by using “Dora” to fill the gap left by Ida Bauer’s departure. The roman à clef thus becomes not merely an analytic tool designed to help the analyst “restore what is missing,” but an interpretive technique capable of creating a new kind of knowledge about the self.
Freud soon discovers, however, that this narrative form possesses a social life of its own and that his celebrity, or what he calls, “the irksome attentions of a city that focuses quite particularly on my work as a physician,” threatens to undermine the interpretive authority he seized from his patient.32 The work of hiding identities, he worries, obscures crucial facts about his cases while inviting readers to treat serious scientific work as a kind of social gossip, a point he makes explicitly in his introduction to the “Ratman” case: “I find the kind of distortions ... to which one normally has recourse [in writing a case study] increasingly inappropriate and reprehensible. If they are only minor ones they do not fulfill their intended purpose of protecting the patient from indiscreet curiosity, and if they are more substantial then the sacrifice is too great, for they ruin our understanding of the overall logic of the case, which derives precisely from the petty realities of everyday life” (126). The psychoanalytic case study, in effect, depends on the aesthetics (p.56) of detail, on an attentiveness to what Freud calls “the most harmless and banal features.” These are what give critical insight into a patient’s neurosis even as they make him or her most easily “recognizable to all” (Ratman 126). Yet this is also an essential element of the roman à clef as a genre: an obsession with identifying those seemingly innocuous textual details that can abruptly turn fiction into gossip. Freud’s innovative case studies took full advantage of the roman a clef’s innovative potential, but it activated dormant modes of reading and reception that had been largely quiescent throughout the nineteenth century. Surprised by the roman à clef’s anarchic social life, he sought quickly to constrain its energies, turning in his own work away from such narratives toward more abstract and anecdotal forms. This proved, however, an impossible task, since the roman à clef and the case study alike remain vitally productive genres that helped generate new kinds of reading and writing within a burgeoning modernism.

Oscar Wilde’s Open Secrets
In transforming Dora—both the girl and the case study itself—
into a roman à clef, Freud contaminated fact with fiction,
creating an ambiguously open secret at the heart of the text.
As he notes in his postscript to this fragmentary case history,
“I can only repeat over and over again—for I never find it
otherwise—that sexuality is the key to the problem of
psychoneuroses and ... no one who disdains the key will ever
be able to unlock the door” (105). But according to Freud, the
key here is not so much sexuality broadly conceived, as it is
homosexuality. Dora, he insists in a famously startling
footnote, is in love not the with the creepy and abusive Herr
K., but with the man’s wife, a secret that “was the strongest
unconscious current in her mental life” (110). The analyst
comes to this realization, in fact, only after the girl’s treatment
has ended and he has “learnt the importance of the
homosexual current of feeling in psychoneurotics” (110).
Freud thus seeks to reestablish his own interpretive authority
in this note by fixing the boundary between fact and fiction—
which heretofore had defined neurosis—on the identification
of same-sex desire. Indeed, he apparently imagines a series of
erotic exchanges between Dora and Frau K. that provided the
girl with “her knowledge of sexual matters” (110). Earlier in
the case study, Freud had already repeatedly insisted that in
seeking to “guess her secret” he had not introduced any
sexual knowledge the girl did not already possess (65). "Her
knowing all about such things,” he then claims in that climatic
footnote, “and, at the same time, her always pretending not to
know where her knowledge came from was really too
remarkable” (110). Dora’s neurotic confusion (p.57) of fact
and fiction, in short, becomes both sign and symptom of what
Colleen Lamos calls the “pathenogenic secret” of
homosexuality.34 If Freud’s case study provocatively mixes fact
with fiction in order to produce a new kind of knowledge, it
does so here by displacing the secrets of the roman à clef (who
is Dora?) onto the equally unstable secret of homosexuality
(what is Dora?).
In the end, the fragmentary nature of the text and Dora’s abrupt decision to terminate her treatment indicate that as a narrative technology, the roman à clef fails. This owes less to the particulars of the individual case, however, than to Freud’s own inability to grasp the power of the device he had appropriated. He seeks, after all, to discard the roman à clef’s “conditional fictionality” and thereby realign fact and fiction into an antagonistic binary, making Dora “whole” by revealing “her secret.” Such revelations become the basis of psychoanalytic treatment in which the patients are given the necessary “key” to unlock the facts they have deliberately (albeit unconsciously) concealed behind a fictional armor of dreams, symptoms, and fantasies. In this early text, however, Freud fails to realize that the roman à clef becomes a kind of narrative prosthesis, what Tim Armstrong calls “a self-mastering mutilation in which the whole is rejected rather than recovered.”

This resurgent genre structurally refuses resolution, resting on a duplicity that cannot be resolved without destroying its unique pleasures and powers. His final, desperate attempt to make Dora “whole” by introducing the secret of homosexuality thus not only fails to provide a cure, but simultaneously reveals the close connection between the “open secrets” of this narrative form and the equally duplicitous structures of the homosexual closet. Just as the roman à clef depends on the constitutive creation of a secret at the heart of the text, so too, as Eve Sedgwick argues, a new kind of sexuality was emerging that “was distinctly constituted as secrecy.”
If Freud sought finally to delimit and thereby control the roman à clef’s powers by making both Dora and Dora whole again, Oscar Wilde employed the same textual and sexual devices to exploit more fully this emergent array of “self-mastering mutilations.” Just as the case study deliberately manipulates the conventions of fiction in order to develop and disseminate a new set of facts about the human subject, so too Wilde deliberately blurs the boundary between fact and fiction in an effort to escape what he calls, in *The Decay of Lying*, “the prison-house of realism.”\(^\text{37}\) Appending elements of his own celebrity persona to seemingly fictional texts, he uses the roman à clef to reactivate the “extreme skepticism” the realist novel sought to control. His “entire oeuvre,” Rhoda Garelick argues, “is dedicated precisely to collapsing distinctions between private and public, life and work, artist and celebrity,” exploiting the roman à clef’s structures to pose again that vexing question, “How much of this story is true?” Where Freud seeks unity and a “key,” (p.58) however, Wilde instead attempts to preserve what Michael Patrick Gillespie calls a “hypostatically suspended” truth, one that depends on the genre’s “conditional fictionality” and infectiousness.\(^\text{38}\) Such playfulness has its limits, however, and Wilde, like Dora, finds that the ambiguous secrets of his own texts can themselves be forcibly aligned around the epistemology of the closet. In the courtroom, fact and fiction would be painfully disarticulated in a way that helped define a decades-long engagement with the roman à clef.
Wilde’s experiments with this anarchic narrative form both propagated and depended on his celebrity. Theatrical audiences urged him onto the stage after his premieres to take a bow—not only as the playwright but as the alter-ego of fictional dandies like Viscount Goring and Lord Darlington.39 In his 1891 novella *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the painter Basil Hallward at once acknowledges this public appetite for Wilde’s celebrity while simultaneously disavowing it. In deciding not to exhibit the stunning portrait of his young friend, he bemoans the fact that “we live in an age when men treat art as if it were meant to be a form of autobiography.”40 He then concludes with a longer defense of aesthetic autonomy and of his own goals as an artist: “We have lost the abstract sense of beauty. Some day I will show the world what it is; and for that reason the world shall never see my portrait of Dorian Gray” (11). Hallward’s reasoning here is enigmatic, acknowledging that this portrait not only can but perhaps should be read autobiographically since it lacks the alienating qualities of an “abstract” aesthetic—a point he earlier acknowledged in allowing that the picture contained “the secret of my own soul” (5). The painter’s friend, Lord Henry Wotton (who serves as a textual double for Wilde’s public persona), finds this lament baffling too, saying “I think you are wrong, Basil, but I won’t argue with you” (11). It is not clear, however, just where the painter’s error lies: in the vogue for autobiography? The essentially abstract quality of beauty? Or simply the decision not to exhibit the painting? This deliberately vague response captures effectively the roman à clef’s ambiguity and the unique narrative resources it offers. After all, the text mounts a defense of aesthetic autonomy through the figure of the artist while simultaneously undermining the claim through the words of the character most closely associated with the author himself.41 The celebrity persona is here pitted against the artist, and the encounter’s “conditional fictionality” frustrates any attempt to adjudicate between them.
With increasing ingenuity, Wilde strategically deployed the roman à clef throughout his writing to mount a critique of both Victorian realism and the kind of proto-modernist abstraction Hallward praises. Both aesthetic modes, after all, depend on preserving a central, organizing autonomy that cleaves fact and fiction into two mutually opposed realms. This is the very distinction Wilde sought to challenge, however, and his critical writing during the 1890s turns on the deliberate attempt to muddle this divide, from the dizzying pursuit of Shakespeare’s inspiration for the sonnets in “The Portrait of Mr W. H.” to the witty dialogue in “The Decay of Lying.” This latter work, in particular, contends that the realist novel has all but exhausted its energy in what Vivian (the Wilde-like figure in the piece) describes as a perilous obsession with mimeticism. In a passage that initially sounds like a critique of the roman à clef, he argues that “the modern novelist presents us with dull facts under the guise of fiction”: “He insists on going directly to life for everything, and ultimately, between encyclopedias and personal experience, he comes to the ground, having drawn his types from the family circle or from the weekly washerwoman” (293). In the attempt to capture reality, in other words, art has become indistinguishable from history, the novel having collapsed entirely into a kind of crude sociology satirically linked here to Herbert Spencer and the Royal Society. The only response, Vivian asserts, is to embrace what he calls society’s “lost leader, the cultured and fascinating liar” (305) who can invent new kinds of fiction without regard to dull and dreary facts.

Crucially, however, in associating the artist with the liar, Vivian avoids a simplistic defense of aesthetic autonomy in order to engage instead the ambiguities of the roman à clef. Structured as a dialogue laced with witticisms, the text counts on our ability to discern the persona of Wilde himself in the character of Vivian. Thus, when he argues that “the only real people are the people who never existed,” a paradox emerges as Vivian disavows the very confusion between reality and fiction animating the text itself. “If a novelist,” he continues, “is base enough to go to life for his personages he should at least pretend that they are creations, and not boast of them as copies” (297). This is an apt description of “conditional fictionality” as it emerged amidst the celebrity culture of the late nineteenth century: a factual text “pretending” to be fiction, its author’s own disavowal embedded—like Wilde’s—
within the narrative itself. Vivian, in the “Decay of Lying,” thus extends the roman à clef into the public sphere so as to reactivate the “extreme skepticism” the novel struggles to contain. “Literature,” Vivian claims, “always anticipates life. It does not copy it, but moulds it to its purpose” (308–9). Far from a defense of the realist novel’s autonomy, this argument insists that the roman à clef permits certain kinds of narrative to reach into the world of fact, prompting his own creative rereading of the literary canon: “Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that characterises modern thought, but Hamlet invented it. The world has become sad because a puppet was once melancholy. The Nihilist, that strange martyr who has no faith, who goes to the stake without enthusiasm, and dies for what he does not believe in, is a purely literary product. He was invented by Tourgénieff, and (p.60) completed by Dostoieffski. Robespierre came out of the pages of Rousseau as surely as the People’s Palace rose out of the debris of a novel” (308). Vivian’s hermeneutic refuses to prioritize fact or fiction since the resurgent roman à clef cuts both ways, rewiring the circuits running between readers, writers, and texts. When turning to Thackeray’s Vanity Fair, for example, he treats it first as a traditionally conceived roman à clef in which real details can be extracted from a fictional façade: “I once asked a lady, who knew Thackeray intimately, whether he had any model for Becky Sharp. She told me that Becky was an invention, but that the idea of the character had been partly suggested by a governess who lived in the neighborhood of Kensington Square, and was the companion of a very selfish and rich old woman.” Here fiction and reality are initially aligned so that the latter emerges as the text’s hidden truth, its necessary but concealed origin. Vivian goes on to relate, however, that after the appearance of Vanity Fair, this governess morphs into her fictional counterpart, “and for a short time made a great splash in society, quite in Mrs. Rawdon Crawley’s style, and entirely by Mrs. Rawdon Crawley’s methods” (309). Like Dora, the governess finds herself exposed to the roman à clef’s infectiousness, subject to the unexpected imbrication of fantasy and reality by a book that begins to write her own life for her.
Wilde published “The Decay of Lying” in 1891, the same year in which *The Picture of Dorian Gray* appeared in book form as an experiment in the resurgent narrative form outlined by Vivian. Like earlier romans à clef framed around celebrity circles, including *Glenarvon* and *The Blithedale Romance*, the book was received as scandalous delectation, met with outrage by critics and enthusiasm by a public eager to peer into Wilde’s elegant and sophisticated world. Yet it also revealed the dangers inherent in the roman à clef. Its ability to inject an “extreme skepticism” about fiction’s boundaries grew so disruptive that its own author eventually found himself—like Thackeray’s governess—struggling against a fiction that began to script his own life. It was in this same year, after all, that Wilde began the affair with Lord Alfred Douglas that eventually led to his trial, imprisonment, and lonely exile. At only their second meeting, Wilde presented to his new friend a signed, presentation copy of *Dorian Gray*. In what would become a powerful demonstration of the roman à clef’s infectious potential, this novella would later be entered into evidence in Wilde’s trials and essentially treated as if it described the affair that actually followed its publication.
The magical painting around which the book’s plot rotates is itself a “self-mastering mutilation” that absorbs Dorian’s increasingly terrifying sins so he can remain eternally youthful and beautiful. Pursuing a career of riot and hedonism from the town houses of Kensington to the East End docks, he seeks to become a (p.61) pure fiction, locking the painting registering the horrifying reality of his actions in an attic so that he can “become the spectator of one’s own life” and thereby “escape the suffering of life” (110). Because he does not bear the marks of history in his flesh, his mutilated self can experience new kinds of pleasures and knowledge. He “sought to elaborate some new scheme of life that would have its reasoned philosophy and its ordered principles, and find in the spiritualizing of the senses its highest realization” (130).

Dorian’s elaborate defense of what Henry Wotton calls the “new Hedonism,” however, depends on separating the fact of degradation from the fiction of his beauty (130). Like Vivian’s nascent theory of the roman à clef, Wilde’s text subtly insists on the ambiguous reconfiguration of the news/novel divide. Thus, Dorian finds himself constantly lamenting “the tragedy of his own soul,” indulging his own brand of skepticism, which prompts him to flee parties and study the painting locked securely in his attic (135). The magical canvas, in other words, does not permanently sever the connection between fact and fiction, but only further destabilizes it, creating a longing for organic unity just as alluring as the new kind of experience it offers. This renders the painting itself less a deeply suppressed truth than a dangerously open secret. Dorian is finally destroyed only at the moment he attempts to slash the painting and thereby restore the precedence of his aestheticized self over the “monstrous soul-life” emblazoned on the canvas (223). In assaulting the painting, Dorian rips away the ambiguity integral to his identity. As he dies, the “conditional fictionality” of his life suddenly collapses and the history of his crimes are inscribed upon an unrecognizable corpse watched impassively by the suddenly autonomous portrait.
Dorian’s attack on the painting may mark the end of the text, but the energies released by its experiment with the roman à clef resonated widely. Just as the protagonist’s friends in some fundamental way misread him, so too Wilde’s public found themselves struggling to resolve the book’s own tantalizingly open secrets about its author’s life. Trying to link Wilde both to Dorian and to Henry Wotton, critics in the *St. James Gazette*, the *Daily Chronicle*, *Punch*, and the *Scots Observer* all decried the book as morally corrosive, shocking, and even dangerous. Wilde’s now well-known responses to these allegations sharply turn this critique on the readers and reviewers themselves by arguing that “there is a terrible moral in Dorian Gray—a moral which the prurient will not be able to find in it, but which will be revealed to all whose minds are healthy.”44 The interpretive burden is rhetorically shifted here from author to reader, so that troubled reviewers found themselves accused of the very immorality they had tried to discern in Wilde himself. Such a move is predicated on the roman à clef’s “conditional fictionality” and insists that the book does indeed contain some kind of destabilizing secret (p.62) truth that nevertheless cannot be definitively separated from its fiction. When the story appears in book form, Wilde further extends the roman à clef’s reach in his famous preface, which, in a series of epigrams, defines with surprising precision the evolving structure of the modernist roman à clef. “All art,” he writes, “is at once surface and symbol,” and he warns of the “peril” of trying to resolve this seemingly deconstructive tension in favor of one or the other (xxiii). Insisting that the text function either as an autonomous fiction or a morally fraught history risks revealing not the text’s secrets, but the reader’s own. “It is the spectator,” he writes echoing his initial responses to the book’s reviews, “and not life, that art really mirrors” (xxiv). Here then is both the cost and promise Wilde’s experiment with the roman à clef proffers: deliberately confusing the boundary between fact and fiction makes reading itself an increasingly anarchic and infectious exercise since the secrets we unlock might be our own. What he tragically fails to grasp, however, is that this epistemological ambiguity has legal as well as aesthetic dimensions that can be dangerously resolved when it passes beyond his interpretive control.

Hidden Truths
After the publication of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Wilde experimented ever more creatively with this kind of open yet risky secrecy. The plots in his brilliant social comedies all depend on the preservation of scandalous secrets whose eventual revelation serves not to realign the moral and amorous worlds of the play, but to insist on the endless interpenetration of fact and fiction. In *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for example, secret identities proliferate seemingly without point or purpose since love, marriage, and identity finally come to depend less on some essential, factual self than on the fiction of individual names. Thus, both protagonists seek to be rechristened as Earnest, and one even discovers that he had quite literally been swapped with a novel at birth. And since suave and witty Wilde-like characters move effortlessly through these plays, the boundary between fact and fiction becomes even more porous. Famously, the author himself would regularly appear on stage after the performance, seeming to step out of the play’s fictions to entertain the audience beyond the limits of the scripted text. Garelick argues that for Wilde “the on- and off-stage—or literary and extraliterary—narratives were identical.” Such a claim, however, is too simplistic, missing the most daring element of Wilde’s narrative innovation. Far from making fact and fiction “identical,” he sought instead to extend each into the other without resolving the structural (p.63) tension between them. Rather than aligning on- and off-stage worlds, these texts instead activated the creative possibilities emerging from a resurgent skepticism about the news/novel divide.
On the page and in performance Wilde pushed the conditional limits of his fictions, testing the roman à clef’s infectiousness as well as its extension into the historical world. At the London premiere of Lady Windermere’s Fan in February 1892, for example, several men arrived wearing green carnation boutonnières, which had briefly been a symbol of homosexuality in Paris the year before; most in the audience were mystified, as Wilde had predicted they would be in a conversation with W. Graham Robertson: “A young man on the stage will wear a green carnation; people will stare at it and wonder. Then they will look round the house and see here and there more and more specks of mystic green. ‘This must be some secret symbol,’ they will say: ‘What on earth can it mean?’” The point, Wilde tells Robertson, is that the carnation means “nothing whatever.” And at the end of the performance, Wilde himself appeared on stage, folding the perplexed audience into the play itself by extending his congratulations on the “great success of your performance.” The boundary between fact and fiction here does not collapse, but instead becomes conditional—even neurotic—as the audience finds itself linked to the fiction onstage while trying to piece together the apparently open secret of the green carnations around them. This may, of course, have been a joke largely at their expense, an instance of Sedgwick’s “glass closet,” which both manages to reveal and to conceal homosexuality simultaneously. Crucially, however, Wilde insists on the symbol’s fundamental lack of meaning, its suspension between fact and fiction or between “surface” and “symbol.” The flower, in short becomes a narrative element Wilde grafts onto his own play about secrets in high society in order to plunge the audience into the hermeneutic confusion Wilde believes essential to the roman à clef.
The brilliance of these experiments in genre and performance, however, depends on preserving the roman à clef’s anarchic potential; Wilde managed skillfully throughout the 1890s to generate the kind of secrets that, like those dyed flowers, could successfully mean both everything and “nothing whatever.” Indeed, in the wake of *Dorian Gray* and *Lady Windermere’s Fan*, similar kinds of texts began to appear, including E. F. Benson’s *Dodo* in 1893 and, a year later, the even more scandalous *Green Carnation*. The latter was published anonymously and, by seeming to reveal all of the secrets Wilde had so carefully managed to hold in dynamic tension, it proved perilously infectious. The book was an immediate success, running through several printings in a matter of months while scandalizing not only the wider public but Wilde’s own circle of friends, who were outraged (p.64) by its portraits of Douglas, Queensbury, and others. Like many romans à clef, its success depends less on plot or style than on an aesthetics of detail similar to “the petty realities of everyday life” Freud describes in his preface to “The Ratman.” Its protagonist, Lord Reggie Hastings, is plainly modeled on Alfred Douglas, just as the witty and provocative dandy, Esmé Amarinth, so closely resembles Wilde that Frank Harris called it a “sort of photograph of Oscar,” which “on all sides [was] referred to as confirming the worst suspicions.” Unlike *Dorian Gray*, the open secrets at the book’s core are explicitly sexual, as Lord Reggie uses his green carnation to help seduce his fiancée’s young son, urging him to “love” the flower that has “the supreme merit of being perfectly unnatural.” Eventually, the terrified fiancée breaks the engagement, much to the relief of Esmé, who tells the younger man he is again free to live “your marvelous scarlet life” and teach “the London tradesmen the exact value of your supreme aristocracy” (210). As the novel closes, Esmé relaxes in a railway carriage, smoking a “gold-tipped cigarette” while declaring “there is only one sanity in all the world, and that is to be artistically insane” (210).
Speculation about the author’s identity was rampant and rumors suggested the portrait was so intimate and so exact that it must have been drawn by one of Wilde’s closest intimates. ⁵⁰ Indeed, although some suggested that it might have been penned by the best-selling Marie Corelli, others suspected Wilde himself may have been the anonymous author. As Neil McKenna notes in his biography, however, Wilde and his friends immediately sought to distance themselves from the book, since it threatened to infect and thereby shatter the “hypostatic tension” underlying both Dorian Gray and his popular plays. The roman à clef’s structural tension between fact and fiction slips in The Green Carnation, transforming an otherwise vitally empty secret into the constitutive secret of homosexual desire. That is, the genre Wilde so effectively used to queer the binary opposition between fact and fiction quickly exceeded his control, becoming a narrowly proscribed queer narrative, its fictional secret reduced to the dangerous fact of homosexuality. Aware of the potential damage this book could do to all of his works by retroactively constellating them around the singular secret of same-sex love, Wilde promptly wrote to the Pall Mall Gazette: “Kindly allow me to contradict, in the most emphatic manner, the suggestion, made in your issue of Thursday last, and since then copied in many other newspapers, that I am the author of The Green Carnation. I invented that magnificent flower. But with the middle-class and mediocre book that usurps its strangely beautiful name I have, I need hardly say, nothing whatsoever to do. The flower is a work of art. The book is not.” ⁵¹ Even as Wilde tries to maintain the ambiguity of his own emblem, he seeks to fall back on the very concept of aesthetic autonomy his works undermine by decrying the text as vulgar and unaesthetic. Significant damage, however, had already been done, as the genre’s deconstructive potential gave way to its pragmatic social life. As McKenna notes, The Green Carnation only further inflamed the wrath of Douglas’s father, and theater audiences began to turn on Wilde himself. The revelation that the book had, in fact, been written by Robert Hichens, who knew the principals only slightly, did nothing to diminish the reconstitution of Wilde’s work around the central, organizing secret of homosexuality. ⁵²
The publication of *The Green Carnation* may not have actually precipitated the disastrous set of decisions that eventually led Wilde to the dock, but it clearly contributed to these events. As McKenna notes, the book’s publication was extremely risky, and its publisher, William Heinemann, sought legal advice, fearing that he might be named in a libel suit by Wilde or Douglas (305). As we will see in the next two chapters, the relationship between libel and the roman à clef is complicated; it may well be that Wilde decided not to bring a case because it might only have further contributed to the suspicions already cast on his own work. The book and the damage it had done were still fresh, however; when Queensbury left his infamous card addressed to “Oscar Wilde posing as a somdomite [sic]” with a porter at the Albemarle Club in February 1895. This, of course, prompted Wilde (after being urged on by Douglas) to swear out a complaint of criminal libel against Queensbury, leading to the latter’s arrest on March 2.

This trial has been analyzed and treated in great detail by a wide array of critics, biographers, and theorists, but following the publication of the complete transcript as *Irish Peacock and Scarlet Marques: The Real Trial of Oscar Wilde*, it has become clear just how powerfully the proceedings turned on the fictional status of *Dorian Gray*. This is largely a consequence of that infamous card accusing Wilde of “posing,” a term that, in its emphasis on public performance, implies its own troubling disruption of the fact–fiction divide. To prove the truth of the libel in his defense, Queensbury had to establish conclusively not that Wilde had committed homosexual acts, but that he had created a public persona for himself as a “sodomite.” Thus throughout the trial Carson cross-examines Wilde about the contents of his work, seeking to transform texts like *Dorian Gray* not into open confessions but into duplicitous romans à clef that deliberately yet openly conceal the secret of homosexuality.
This legal strategy first emerges when the defense enters into evidence the 1896 issue of an Oxford magazine titled *The Chameleon* containing “Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young.” Carson focuses his questions on a story from the same issue entitled “The Priest and the Acolyte” by John Edgar Bloxham that deals with an erotic relationship between a priest and a young man. After sparring (p.66) over the potential immorality of the story, Carson asks “I think you would admit, Mr Wilde, that anyone who was connected with or who would allow himself publicly to approve of that article would be posing as a sodomite?” Wilde denies this, but in doing so resorts to the very same defense he had publicly deployed against *The Green Carnation*, alleging that the story in question is in “very bad literary taste” (72). When pressed further, he reprises his response to the *Scots Observer*, telling Carson that “he who has found the sin has brought it” before insisting that he cannot be held responsible for the “misinterpretation of my work [by] the ignorant, the illiterate, the foolish” (78, 81). Hewing closely to the logic of the roman à clef, he refuses to acknowledge that the text possesses any central fact or secret, eventually frustrating Carson by telling him “you must remember that novels and life are different things” (103). Almost immediately, however, Wilde then invokes this same logic to include not just *Dorian Gray*, but several potentially damaging letters he had written Douglas and other young men. In discussing a phrase about “red rose-leaf lips” in one such letter, for example, he asserts a desire only to make a “beautiful thing” and thus “cannot answer any question” about morality or propriety “apart from art” (105).

Wilde extends the “conditional fictionality” of his work to this letter in an attempt to disrupt Caron’s line of questioning by undermining the supposed transparency of juridical evidence. As Wilde earlier told the court, “I rarely think that anything I write is true … not true in the actual sense of correspondence to actual facts of life” (74). Witty rejoinders like these were often met with laughter according to the transcript, but they become the most serious part of Wilde’s own defense since they typically manage to graft fiction onto fact. As a result, the court’s search for a unified, even organic sense of truth is temporarily replaced by the ambiguously open secrets at the heart of *Dorian Gray* that *The Green Carnation* had so dangerously filled.
In pursuing this strategy, Wilde sought not just to win his case against Queensbury, but also to reclaim some control over the roman à clef—the genre on which his own success was founded—by insisting on its instability. This may, in fact, help explain why he brought the case in the first place, despite warnings from friends like Harris that the defense could easily counter “clever talk about your books” by bringing up “a string of witnesses that will put art and literature out of the question.” Wilde treated his work as more than just “clever talk”; it was instead an acutely probative critique of aesthetic autonomy and novelistic realism. To the extent that the narrowly conceived libel in this trial turned on the word “posing,” the author of *Dorian Gray* could thus continue to exploit the deep structural ambiguities so essential to the “prison house of realism,” holding fiction at a conditional and therefore critical remove from reality. Thus, when Edward Carson begins his opening remarks for the defense, he has to deploy a logic as convoluted as his syntax:

Lord Queensbury took care in all his letters ... to persistently state that he did not accuse Mr Wilde of the actual felony [of sodomy]—that would be a matter which would subject Mr Wilde to very serious consequences if it were true—but of ‘posing as a sodomite’ and I think you will say that really meant that Mr Wilde, by his acts and writings, was putting himself in that position that people might naturally and reasonably infer from the writings and the course of life he was adopting, that he, Mr Wilde, was either in sympathy with, or addicted to, immoral and sodomitic acts. (255)

Carson here clearly runs afoul of the roman à clef’s structural contradictions as he struggles first to separate fact from fiction by alleging Wilde is not actually accused of being a sodomite, only to then collapse the two by arguing that the book may be used as evidence to indict the life.
Ultimately, however, libel laws exist essentially to demarcate and police a stark divide between fact and fiction. Carson’s arguments thus succeed precisely at the moment he abandons “the question of the literature involved in this case” and shifts his emphasis from the ambiguities of “posing” to Wilde’s sexual acts. As Carson threatens to introduce witnesses like Charles Parker and Alfonso Conway, the deconstructive powers of the roman à clef begin to fail as the text congeals around the constitutive secret of homosexuality. Rather than a book capable of queering the boundaries between fiction and fact, *Dorian Gray* suddenly becomes—like Hichens’s *The Green Carnation*—a queer book founded less on a generative doubt than on a crippling “perversion.” Aware that these witnesses could lead to Wilde’s own criminal prosecution, his attorney abruptly sought to conclude the case by either withdrawing the charge or submitting to a verdict of “not guilty.” In doing so, he too adopts Carson’s tortured logic about Wilde’s work, asking that the verdict itself have “reference, if to a part of the particulars at all, then to that part of the particulars which is connected with the publication of *Dorian Gray* and the publication of *The Chameleon*” (281). That is, he seeks here to return these texts precisely to the “prison-house of realism,” rendering them mere fictions that do not actually impinge upon the facts of their author’s life. As a “self-mastering mutilation,” the roman à clef abruptly becomes less an extension of narrative power for Wilde than a dangerous threat to his personal freedom and individual integrity. The genre, in short, may introduce new kinds of knowledge and identities, but it also threatens constantly to fix those identities in broken, partial, or mutilated forms.
Later, in *De Profundis*, Wilde lamented “the hideous trap in which I ... allowed myself to be caught”; critics now justifiably claim that the libel trial and its aftermath played a key role both in establishing homosexuality as an identity and in transforming it into a deeply constitutive secret. Dorian Gray and its author’s own daring performance on the stand, however, did more than help delimit an emergent homosexual identity. They also queered the boundary between history and the novel and, in the process, began to expose a series of faults in the legal and aesthetic dispensation on which the realist novel had been staked since its emergence in the eighteenth century. As literature became increasingly entangled with the open secret of its own potential historicity, the roman à clef once again began to operate as a creative counter-form to the novel. Wilde and Freud energetically seized upon it, and, though working from opposite sides of the fact–fiction divide, both successfully exploited its ability to generate new kinds of pleasure and knowledge. These same writers, however, also both eventually abandoned the form, finding—as others too would later discover—that it depends upon an unpredictable and even treacherous skepticism when routed through the networks of an expanding celebrity culture. The energies they helped unleash reactivated legal, aesthetic, and moral debates that resonated throughout the early decades of the twentieth century. As history and the novel began once more sliding into one another, authors, publishers, critics, and even law courts struggled to define the roman à clef’s limits by seeking new ways to answer the question, “How much of this story is true?” As the next two chapters will show, this was as much a legal challenge as an aesthetic one, its implications extending from the monumental works of James Joyce to a British system of libel law that, until reformed, had all but declared fiction itself illegal. Despite the collapse of Wilde’s own libel suit, in fact, the arguments over the precise fictional (or factual) status of a text like *Dorian Gray* formed a vital strand of this emergent modernism.

Notes:


These include the period’s two best-selling novels: George Du Maurier’s *Trilby* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1894) and Marie Corelli’s *Sorrows of Satan* (London: J. B. Lippincott, 1895). The former, first serialized in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1894, contains a devastating portrait of James McNeil Whistler that had to be removed under threat of a libel suit. This fictional double nevertheless haunted Whistler for the rest of his life and is even mentioned at the opening of his obituary in the *Times* of London (July 18, 1903).


Ibid., 104.


In T. S. Eliot’s famous essay on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “Ulysses, Order and Myth,” in *The Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (New York: Harcourt, 1975), Eliot writes that what he calls the “narrative method,” and with it the novel, “ended with Flaubert and James” only to be replaced by a deeper “order and form” made available through “the mythical method” (76).


(14) Freud’s later works rarely draw on actual case histories. When he does seek to append clinical evidence for his claims, furthermore, he resorts to a much more abstract kind of writing that does not substitute fictional pseudonyms for real names. This passage from a 1915 essay, “The Unconscious,” in General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology (New York: Macmillan, 1963), is typical: “Dr. Viktor Tausk of Vienna has placed at my disposal some observations that he has made in the initial stages of schizophrenia, which are particularly valuable in that the patient herself was eager to explain her utterances further.” Having distanced himself from the actual scene of treatment, Freud then employs a somewhat more conventional anonymous third-person to describe one of these patients: “One of Tausk’s patients, a girl who was brought to the clinic after a quarrel with her lover, complained that her eyes were not right, they were twisted (143–44).


(16) Allegedly, the “Ratman” would answer the phone using this name rather than his own.


(18) Hippocratic Oath.
(19). James Braid, *Neurypnology; or, the Rationale of Nervous Sleep Considered in Relation with Animal Magnetism* (London: John Churchill, 1843), 204. For a useful compendium of primary sources relating to the history of psychiatry, see the website maintained by Ed Brown at http://bms.brown.edu/HistoryofPsychiatry/hop.html (accessed October 14, 2008).

(20). Wittmann went on to work as a laboratory assistant for Marie Curie in whose service she lost three limbs to radiation poisoning. Her life has been creatively reinvented in Per Olov Enquist, *The Story of Blanche and Marie*, trans. Tina Nunnally (London: Secker, 2006).

(21). I am grateful to Professor Elana Newman at the University of Tulsa and Professor Harold Kudler at Duke University for their help in guiding me through the evolution of the psychological case study.


(24). In *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), Eve Sedgwick argues that “a whole cluster of the most crucial sites for the contestation of meaning in twentieth-century Western culture are consequentially and quite indelibly marked with the historical specificity of homosocial/homosexual definition, notably but not exclusively male, from around the turn of the century.” Lodged at the intersection between the public and the private, the roman à clef is uniquely positioned to explore this epistemology. As this chapter argues, it effectively queers both the novel and the psychiatric case study in order to render homosexuality as the constitutive secret upon which is staked what Sedgwick calls “the subject—the thematics—of knowledge and ignorance themselves, of innocence and initiation, of secrecy and disclosure” (72, 74).


(27) In a letter of October 14, 1900, to Wilhelm Fleiss, written shortly after Dora arrived in his exam room, Freud too invokes this same lock and key metaphor that implicitly evokes the roman à clef: “it has been a lively time and I have a new patient, a girl of eighteen; the case has opened smoothly to my collection of picklocks” (325). Freud, *The Origins of Psychoanalysis: Letters to Wilhelm Fleiss, Drafts, Notes* (New York: Basic Books, 1977).

(28) The excised material was privately published under Symonds’s name in London in 1896 as *A Problem in Modern Ethics, Being an Inquiry into the Phenomenon of Sexual Inversion Addressed Especially to Medical Psychologists and Jurists* (London: n.p., 1896).


(31) Jen Shelton, *Joyce and the Narrative Structure of Incest* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2006), 30, 27. Like Shelton, a number of critics argue that Freud’s attempt to mix fact and fiction in this narrative depends on the text’s ability to suppress the facts of her abuse. “Dora had been traumatized, and Freud retraumatized her,” writes Patrick J. Mahoney, in *Freud’s Dora: A Psychoanalytic, Historical, and Textual Study* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 149. For a thorough assessment of similar analyses, see Bernheimer and Kahane, eds.


(33) He writes: “There is never any danger of corrupting an inexperienced girl. For where there is no knowledge of sexual processes even in the unconscious, no hysterical symptom will arise; and where hysteria is found there can no longer be any question of ‘innocence of mind’ in the sense in which parents and educators use the phrase” (42).


(39) . Such works technically fall into the complex generic category of the *drame à clef*, which, because of drama’s more immediate relationship to indexical reality, has its own unique history running only roughly parallel to the roman à clef. As a result, I deal with it here only in passing.


(42) . “The Decay of Lying” captures here the importance of treating the roman à clef as a pragmatic rather than typologically delimited form. Critics traditionally read it not as a roman à clef, but as a Platonic dialogue, its classical abstraction shifting attention from characters to their ideas. But Vivian can also function quite easily as a disguise for Wilde himself and in doing so shifts the reader’s attention to the interplay between person and persona. As we’ll see in chapter 5, W. J. Turner tried to shield himself from the charge of having written a potentially libelous roman à clef by arguing that he too had crafted nothing more than an abstract dialogue, despite the fact that most readers easily recognized in it a callous portrait of Ottoline Morrell.
(43) The Picture of Dorian Gray first appeared in the July 1890 issue of Lippincott’s Monthly magazine, before being revised and expanded into a novella published by Ward, Lock and Company in April 1891. The “Preface” was published first in the Fortnightly Review before being added to the 1891 book. The differences between the two versions are significant. Nevertheless, both versions depend heavily on the roman à clef and I quote throughout from reviews of both editions.


(45) Garelick, 128.


(47) Cited in McKenna, 170.

(48) Frank Harris, Oscar Wilde (Michigan, 1959), 106, 107.

(49) Robert Hichens, The Green Carnation (New York: D. Appleton, 1895), 151. Further references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

(50) Wilde and Douglas themselves both suspected Ada Leverson. As McKenna notes, Max Beerbohm wrote to her as well, saying, “I am not surprised that [they] think anything so witty as the ‘Green Carnation’ must have been written by you” (304).

(51) Wilde, Letters, 617.

(52) Well aware of the damage his book had done, Hichens wrote in an introduction to the 1948 edition of The Green Carnation (London: Robin Clark, 1992), that he had been inspired almost entirely by Dodo: “I am sure I should never have written it if I had not met ‘Dodo’ Benson on the Nile, and been pricked into a desire to emulate his success” (xvi). Hichens even relates a story that seems to indicate Douglas had endorsed the book and claims that he unsuccessfully sought to have the book withdrawn immediately following Wilde’s arrest.


(55) Harris, Oscar Wilde, 338.


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