

UNCOMMON PLACEMENT: READING SEXUALITY AND MASOCHISM IN THE 19TH CENTURY COMMONPLACE BOOK

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Deciphering what formulations of sexuality and desire existed in the past continues to be one of the most complex problems challenging scholars currently invested in queer theory. We must constantly ask ourselves what vocabularies and codes are germane to subjects of a particular period. Often, in excavating “truths” about past intimacies, historians turn to archives which boast truth-bearing qualities: journals, letters, wills, or interviews. However, investigations of such documents often ignore the very conditions of writing itself. That is to say, alongside the documents which mark chronological history runs a second, silent history, a the history of the structures, conditions, and forces which shape experience’s emergence into discursivity: for example, heteronormative obligations which impel one to make a will, or the weight of a religious ideology coloring one’s confession in a journal. Rather than weaving narratives from such “truth-bearing” documents, we might turn instead to fiction, to consider the ways that fiction’s distance from auto-representative, “real” language creates a cushion of space in which the subject can imagine, fantasize, or perform sexual desires that the author self-censored from journal entries. The commonplace book, a record book of poetry, maxims, and snippets of fiction which appealed to the reader, remains under-explored in the domains of literary and sexuality studies.¹ In the division between “recorded life” and “literarily molded life” emerges a genre divide, and the commonplace book, which both records and molds life, falls forgotten in the conceptual gap between the two discursive forms—despite the fact that commonplace books were eminently popular and widely used from the early modern period through the nineteenth century.

One significant commonplace book, belonging to Yale University benefactor John William Sterling (1844-1918), illustrates the ways that subject’s literary selections may enrich our understanding of sexuality in the past. I propose here a way

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of conceiving the commonplace book as an archive of affect, a compendium of the quotations, words and phrases which “moved” or inspired a person to jot it down.² In this instance, literary (aesthetic) taste and sexual taste appear closely intertwined. Historian Jonathan Ned Katz has previously addressed Sterling’s lifelong partnership with another man, but Katz’s research draws primarily from Sterling’s journal entries and published biography. Sterling’s own journal, however, was fraught with strikeouts and moments of self-censorship, rendering the fiability of such a document questionable.

My analysis is two-part: first, Sterling’s own journal entries as well as theories about the historiography of sexuality reveal inherent prejudices and myopias produced by the value-laden term “experience”—a hierarchy of value that is performatively enacted as the researcher selects and investigates what texts are worthy of study. From there, a close reading of Sterling’s commonplace book will illustrate how the reading of reading practices can illuminate documented “experiences” in his journal and enrich our understanding of the myriad, multiple, and fleeting ways that sexuality was recorded and enacted. For Sterling, the commonplace book acts as a technology of the self. He subjects himself to the self-discipline elicited by the commonplace book’s form and function, relishing in extreme exercises of reading, writing and oration. The commonplace book not only supplements the strikeouts and gaps in Sterling’s self-representation in his journal, with literary indications of affect and (sexual) taste, but also acts as the very arena of his masochistic, pleasurable submission to academic toil. In my analysis, I propose a way of thinking of the commonplace book as a site of sexuality itself, as both the means and presentation of an engagement with excessive intellectual labor, which is itself experienced as masochistic pleasure.

JOURNALED LIFEWriting, COMMONPLACE BOOK SUPPLEMENTS

When John William Sterling died in 1918, he was “technically” still a bachelor. “Technically,” because, although unmarried, he had shared the latter fifty years of his life with James Orville Bloss, a man three years his junior with whom he shared a home, but more importantly, a type of intimate existence. Childless, Sterling willed more than 15 million dollars (equivalent to about 180 million U.S. dollars today) to Yale University, becoming, at the time, the largest-ever single benefactor to an institute of learning.³ Despite these fifty years of cohabitation, however, Bloss remains remarkably absent from Sterling’s otherwise detailed journals.

The omission of Bloss from Sterling’s journals may be indicative of a level of self-censorship; this careful pruning of intimacy from his later journals is foreshadowed in an earlier entry. In the fall of 1862, as a young 18-year old undergraduate at Yale, Sterling wrote in his journal, “Sept.-Oct. 1862:” “I slept with Jim Mitchell last night,

an: I have been very busy today. I got my first lesson this noon upon my table and in a borrowed chair.” Sterling never finishes his anecdote, and instead abruptly changes the topic to focus on his industriousness and his studies. Katz notes, “the 19th century distinction between affection and the sexual meant that young men friends could sleep together at Yale without anyone suspecting them of illicit erotic acts, whatever sometimes went on in those beds” (“An Understanding...”).⁴ If so, then the question becomes: what sort of sexual desires can be traced in Sterling’s writings, if at all?

Before embarking on a close analysis of the commonplace book, briefly turning to Sterling’s journal entries illuminates the journal’s particular unfaithfulness. Sterling did not view the journal as a neutral canvas for his thoughts, but rather experienced writing in the journal itself as an activity which he alternatively disdains and takes up again. For example, he writes on May 29, 1870:

I could fill my journal with much that has transpired since I last wrote, if I were only inclined to undergo the labor of writing in this *dead book*. I don’t know why it is that I write in this, even at such long intervals. It doesn’t give me any satisfaction while I wrote and I never look back to see what has been written. Nor do I relish the idea of scribbling for the benefit of those who will seize upon this fragmentary history of my life after I am gone.⁵

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The journal entry, written at the age of 26, reveals Sterling’s awareness that he is not writing the journal merely for his own private reflection. He conceives of an audience, of “those who will seize upon this fragmentary history of my life after I am gone,” thus placing the journal in the realm of an imagined public, instead of in the domain of private reflection.

An earlier entry, written on October 5, 1861, reveals Sterling’s conception of himself that is split, divided between a self that can articulate sinful behavior and a self which is vague and somewhat excluded from legibility. The journal takes on the position of the priestly interlocutor who demands a type of normative behavior. After some stalling and prefatory information about the journal’s paper form, Sterling admits:

I have written all this partly because I may want to be reminded of it in years to come and principally that I might avoid a usual beginning which generally consists of a catalogue of sins, intended to be available in the Future. I have taken this course then to avoid a common exordium I can say in one word I am sinful enough for all practical purposes as well as for some others at some times. But I may add as an appendix that I hope I’m constantly improving.

Sterling divides his “sinfulness” into two categories: “practical purposes” and “some other” purposes. The “sins” that Sterling conceived of as having “some other” purpose are of course impossible to identify solely based on the journal entry, but he clearly indicates a conceptual division between “practical” transgression (in later entries he will guiltily confess that he laughs too readily at “smutty jokes”) and other transgressions to which he can only obliquely allude. This journal entry reveals Sterling’s

October

1861

Oct 5th

A month has elapsed since I made my last entry in my old Journal. I have during this time been unable to find such a book as I deemed fit and finally had this made to order. I never saw one ruled at the top like this and claim it as original and ingenious. This book is rather wider and much larger than my old one. I have written all this partly because I may want to be reminded of it in years to come and principally that I might avoid a usual beginning which generally consists of a catalogue of sins, intended to be avoided in the future. I have taken this course then to make a common exordium. I can say in one word I am successful enough for all practical purposes as well as for some others at some times. But I may add as an afterthought that I hope I'm constantly improving. I certainly try to make progress both in body and mind. I will really say some new facts by just stating one - I heard in Paris, but how to forget. (Though I came to New Haven this term with my mind made up to board at Mrs Woodwuffs in College St yet when I really became hungry and considered the distance and compared the list of names in both (among which I found Thomas name among those of Mrs Woodwuffs) I came to the conclusion to take my board at Paris. A second fact is that I have elected myself in a manner which does credit to my Society and to me a heavy worker there in. Last term I introduced the first member of C5 as an active member of C5. This room mate had determined to go where Omorse did so I pledged as it were two men at once. The name of the one I had not mentioned is Painter. This term I may say in truth there have been but a few of our members who have really worked. I have reference to Symon our President, Holden, Chatterhouse, Vair, Newslay, Tittel and myself. Of these Symon and I have worked the hardest

conceptions of articulable behavior, drawing lines not only between acceptable and unacceptable (sinful) behavior, but also between the sinful behavior that could be expressed in “practical” terms, or quotidian language, and the sinful behavior that is muffled, covered up with the vague blanket term “some others.”

For Sterling, writing in the journal is reduced to pure automation, bereft of some sort of “satisfaction”; in contrast to this “dead book,” we might examine his commonplace book. The commonplace book, almost 150 years old now, displays the wear of time in its decay. The leather-bound edges rub off in a rust-colored powder, both the front and back hardback covers have fallen off. The book consists of 138 collated pages sewn together. Each page displays a collection of quotations and inspirational poems taken from history, literature and philosophy; the authors range from Ovid to contemporary writers in Sterling’s time. The (few) dated quotations range from 1868 to 1883 and are not sewn together in chronological order. The quilted nature of the commonplace books speaks to the effort that Sterling put into its crafting. It seems that he returned to the book again and again at different points in his life, after different spurts of reading, to stuff in and sew in more pages when he had filled the old ones. The book is not a one-time haphazard endeavor, but rather an ongoing work-in-progress that burgeons and expands along with Sterling’s life.

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As close analysis of the commonplace book excerpts demonstrate, Sterling employs the interplay between self-control and self-pleasure that the commonplace book demands in order to draw upon commonplacing for three interrelated functions: as a tool of self-discipline to inspire oneself and to accomplish polished rhetoric, as a performance-site of fantasy for multiple gender identifications, and as a stage to perform his fetishistic pleasure for intellectual labor with the self-discipline demanded by commonplacing practices. In this third, and most original use, of the commonplace book, the reading and writing processes themselves become masochistic.

COMMONPLACE BOOKS: RHETORICS OF SELF-PLEASURING, SELF-MASTERING

Considering commonplace books in general brings us to questions of readerly subject-formation, and reading’s influence on crafting sexual subjectivities. As any avid reader might attest, the pleasures of escaping into a good book or the very experience of reading can produce a rich array of affects that color and condition “real” lived experience. Wolfgang Iser reminds us that reading is a subjectivizing experience, crafted from the tension between illusion-making and the interpretation of the unfamiliar. The pleasure of a wholly illusion-forming text, however, is deemed as a “suspect, if not downright dangerous, process: instead of bringing us into contact with reality, it would wean us away from realities” (Iser 284). One common criticism of pleasure reading is that it offers a dangerous, possibly subversive potential of fantasmatic identification. The “suspect” or “dangerous” nature of such reading-formed

selves means that reading practices are often excluded from what we term “evidence” in the history of sexuality.⁶

Michel Foucault, in his essay “The Hermeneutic of the Subject”, mentions commonplace books as part of the technology, or instruments of the care of the self. Foucault proposes the “care of the self” as an analytic, reminding us that the Ancient Greeks and Romans believed in a system of practices that exceeded simple “care” or “paying attention” to oneself. Rather, Foucault specifies:

S’occuper de soi n’est donc pas une simple préparation momentanée à la vie; c’est une forme de vie[...]. L’objectif final de la conversion à soi est d’établir un certain nombre de relations à soi-même. Ces relations sont parfois conçues sur le modèle juridico-politique: être souverain sur soi-même, exercer sur soi-même une maîtrise parfaite, être pleinement indépendant, être complètement ‘à soi’...elles sont aussi représentées souvent sur le modèle de la jouissance possessive: jouir de soi, prendre son plaisir avec soi-même, trouver en soi tout sa volupté (356).⁷

- 504** While Foucault mentions several techniques of this self-care, one important practice combined reading and writing. The thoughts of established, wise others had been so thoroughly absorbed that in a moment of adversity one would be almost inoculated against any assaults of misfortune. Literature, then, ought to be consumed in a voracious fashion, incorporating the language into oneself such that one would be able to employ the bits of wisdom in an instinctual manner. While Iser seems to warn against the dangers of overidentification with reading practices, Foucault’s analysis of reading seems to underline the dual-edged sword that is the *pharmakon*: that which Iser flags as “dangerous” (or poisonous) has, for Foucault, “une fonction curative et thérapeutique” (“a curative and therapeutic function”) (357). Drinking deeply from the fount of wise words, however, does not suffice to cultivate the self. These reading practices ought to be accompanied by “ce qu’on pourrait appeler l’écriture personnelle: prendre des notes sur les lectures, les conversations, les réflexions qu’on entend ou qu’on se fait à soi-même; tenir des sortes de carnets sur les sujets importants (ce que les Grecs appellent les *hypomnēmata*) et qui doivent être relus de temps en temps pour réactualiser ce qu’ils contiennent” (Foucault 361).⁸ These *hypomnemata* bear a striking resemblance to what we might consider to be a “commonplace book” today.

When the commonplace book enjoyed the height of its popularity in the early modern period, readers in England generally followed variants of a model proposed by Erasmus in his *De Copia*. The emphasis was largely pedagogical as well as rhetorical. Heidi Brayman Hackel reminds us that “The humanist commonplace books offered a system for making reading more profitable, especially for inexperienced readers: students would remember texts more accurately and begin to accumulate a storehouse of examples and stylistic flourishes from which they could draw in conversation and in writing” (145). Fittingly, Sterling’s own commonplace book contains a number of instructional quotations intended to shape the reader’s own rhetoric.

“His :Bolingbroke’s: similes and illustrations are no wanton enrichments of fancy; they support the argument they adorn like buttresses, which however relieved with tracery,

add an air of solidity to the building against which they lean.” [—*unattributed*]

“His sentences flow loose, as if disdainful of verbal care. Yet throughout all there reigns the senatorial decorum. The folds of the toga are not arranged to show off the breadth of the purple hem; the wearer knows too well that however the folds may fall, the hem can not fail to be seen.” —*Buber*

“Conscious thoughts will overflow into words unconsciously.” —*Byron*

In addition to the phantasmic identity-formation that reading offers, the common-placer reads in order to be self-critical, to self-civilize, to improve.⁷ In fact, Tim Murray, analyzing Ben Jonson’s commonplace book in *Theatrical Legitimation*, addresses the ways that the commonplace book tradition need not always be thought of as mimicry or purely pedagogical repetition; the book can actually bear an authorial stamp of originality and serve as a marker of one’s own critical prowess (47-49). For Sterling, we find that the commonplace book embodies twinned powers of reading: self-discipline merged with the pleasures of escape. On the one hand, commonplacing shapes the “extrapolatory” reading processes—reading becomes a technology, in the service of self-control and discipline. On the other hand, as evidenced by Sterling’s selections of popular literary magazines and the non-categorized recording practices, reading also represents, for Sterling, a means of possibly identifying with a larger public, being “moved” by sentimental literature, or simply indulging in the pleasure of a good book, to the ultimate end of “authoring” or articulation of his own particular sexuality.

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The commonplace book’s dual purpose, as self-mastering and self-pleasuring, is apparent in Sterling’s choice of quotations. Just as Sterling expresses some frustration with language in his journals—skirting precision with the vague term “some others” or crossing out words and leaving thoughts unfinished—language’s insufficiency, is, in fact, one recurring theme in his commonplace book. Collecting such quotations may have also served a rhetorical purpose, helping him to think through language’s gaps while formulating his own style. A small sample of such rhetorical quotations follows:

“All lives have their prose translation as well as their ideal meaning.” —Charles Anhester

“There is scarcely any man who would not rather accuse himself of great crimes and dark, tempestuous passions than proclaim all his vanities and wild fancies.” —Macaulay

“The certainty came upon her that the silence of misunderstanding could never be broken.” —Romola

In the first quotation, we see that lives can be discursively rendered, or given in “prose translation,” but the ways that lives can be articulated may deviate from an “ideal meaning,” or an imagined existence that cannot precisely be made manifest through

language and prose. Similarly, the Macaulay quotation alludes to a man's hesitancy to reveal his "vanities and wild fancies." Crimes and passions are more easily understood than private fetishes or proclivities. Here, we might imagine the quotation's relationship to Sterling's ambiguous journal entry in which he divides his sins into "practical" and "some other."

We might inquire as to why Sterling would have selected so many quotations that address the effects of silence or language's inability to describe a life. Sterling, as a white, privileged, wealthy, and intelligent man, had access to the most elite loci of power, ranging from inclusion in the most exclusive societies at Yale (including the secret society Skull and Bones and a fraternity), competitive job offers from the most pre-eminent law firms in New York, and intellectual respect within the academic community. In spite of, or perhaps because of, these inscriptions into so many structures of power, he may have been anxious about a certain ideal of the "Yale man" that he is expected to attain. Judith Butler suggests, "One asks about the limits of ways of
 506 knowing because one has already run up against a crisis within the epistemological field in which one lives. The categories by which social life are ordered produce a certain incoherence or entire realms of unspeakability (307). "Unspeakability" can derive not only from an explicit injunction *against* a certain way of living, but also from structures of existence which fail to make legible certain desires, ambitions, or life perspectives.

MASOCHISTIC DESIRES, FANTASIES OF SUBJUGATION

Many of Sterling's quotations depict an obsession with self-subjugation to intellectual labor, and the pleasures of immediate toil coupled with the deferral of reward. In Sterling's case, the "self-discipline" and "self-pleasure" elicited by the apparatus of the commonplace book merge together in a masochistic self-subjugation to academic labor. In the commonplace book, Sterling preserved an undated clipping from a newspaper, which depicted the "Initiation of Freshmen" at Yale. This clipping details masochistic rites which are more akin to practices of domination and bondage that we associate with modern-day masochism. The anonymous author of the clipping details the "following particulars of the initiation of Freshmen into Yale" which the author is compelled to investigate "knowing, as I do, the curiosity so often manifested by the outside public in these mysterious proceedings." The Freshman, or "victim," as the reporter calls him, is "blindfolded, with his arms securely bound as to prevent any unnecessary muscular development, with his articulating organs so hampered as to prevent a 'flow of the soul,'" is led by his "Sophs" or sophomore torturers, and paraded through public to a secret location. They deposit the Freshman in a gutter and "besmear" him with mud. After this muddy humiliation, "Finding himself securely bound, [the victim] makes several earnest pantomimes that he wants to be free, but to no purpose; for their hearts are hard to his entreaties. Speechless,

jaded and bound, the victim gives up in despair, and makes up his mind to take the world as it comes.” The freshman is then placed in a series of small boxes, bound and hoisted to the ceiling, and dropped from heights onto a “canvass apron” which is surrounded by “as many [Sophs] as are able to cluster around it, who toss him high in air in every conceivable position, until they become weary with the exercise.” After the torture, “wearied and vexed, they allow him to be seated upon a bench, where he hopes his tormentors will let him rest a while, and rub his bruised and sore body...” The article continues to detail other “tortures” performed upon the poor freshman—bound and dangling from the air, pushed onto a platform of (false) spikes, and given the impression of being “buried alive”—until the Freshman is “considered qualified to welcome others, through the same process.”

Although much of the process may well have been fabricated by the journalist, the reporter employs careful detail to paint a scene of pulleys, spikes, suppliant victims, and indifferent tortures to stage a classic scene of sado-masochism. If Sterling himself had already been through the initiation (the article mentions the Class of '66 and Sterling graduated in 1864), then it is unclear why he would need a journalist's outsider perspective to document the supposed rituals that he had experienced already. We might surmise that he enjoyed this article for the titillating images presented, as opposed to mere nostalgia. Furthermore, there were only three newspaper clippings preserved in Sterling's commonplace book, as he tended to prefer copying down entire poems or sections of novels in his own hand or by typewriter. Thus, the fact that this article was not only cut out of the journal, but also saved in his personal effects bequeathed to the university, indicates that such staged fantasies and sexual tendencies were particularly important to Sterling.

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Masochism, of course, need not only be limited to the domain of actual physical punishment. As Leo Bersani notes, sexuality itself might be more probably thought of as a “perturbation or shattering” of the self, “an effect that momentarily undoes psychic organization” (109). Sterling's commonplace book, a site and stage of self-mastery and self-subjugation, illustrates Bersani's version of masochism which conceives of *jouissance* in sexuality as “a defeat of power, a giving up, on the part of an otherwise hyperbolically self-affirming and phallogcentrically constituted ego, of its projects of mastery” (109). In a particularly nineteenth-century context, John Noyes has pointed out that certain apparatuses of technology and self-control are key to a nineteenth-century sense of masochism which is developed from the tension between the nonviolent, civilized behavior expected of “real men” and the requirement that such “real men” use their position to subjugate others:

[Masochism] draws upon stereotypes of violence and technologies of control in order to convert them into technologies of pleasure...Masochism is a *techné erotiké* in the truest sense...The body of the masochist is caught in a tug-of-war between technologies that want to render it productive and others that seek to produce sexual pleasure. (5)

The terrain of masochism, then, becomes not only limited to the body, but also and

more specifically the nineteenth century body's relationship to technology. In the case of Sterling, this "technology" emerges as specifically literary. We might recall that Foucault's mapping of the reading, writing, and commonplacing practices in the service of the "culture de soi" were undertaken in order to achieve certain goals of self-sovereignty and control. Bringing this sense of control back to the commonplace book, we might recall that Ann Moss reminds us of the force of citational practices in the Renaissance period, at the height of the commonplace book's popularity, and the power that we cede to citation still exists in today's discursive world: "Quotation still acts conservatively as a control on present experience, in both senses of the world 'control'" (vi).

508 Sterling's desire for self-control is apparent not only the *content* of his collected quotations, but also his enumerative fetish—for counting the number of pages read, or hours spent in study. Sterling's masochistic tastes are not only archived in the newspaper clippings, but also enacted in his daily self-subjugation to intellectual labor. The commonplace book emerges as a prime site of his self-subjugation. According to biographer John Garver, Sterling's assiduous dedication to study as an undergraduate paid off in the form of a postgraduate appointment in history and literature. Beneath the glossy patina of academic and professional successes, however, lurks a self-subjugation to work, a near obsession with self-discipline, a staving-off of pleasure. By far, the greatest number of quotations in his commonplace book pertain to the value of industry and the deferral of reward.

"Who is rich? He who has subdued his passion. Who is wise? He who learns from all. Who is the hero? He who subdues his passions." —Talmud proverb

"Labor for some or other end is lord and master of us all." —Lord Houghton

"Let us do our work well, both the unseen and the seen." —Longfellow

"All True work is sacred; in all true work, were it but true hand-labor [or: hard-labor], there is something of divineness." —Carlyle

Sterling's relationship to intellectual labor, this interplay between pain and pleasure, seems to express a subjective position that we might liken to masochism. Even in his early diary entries, we can read intimations of the characteristic diligence and stringent self-discipline that thread through his later entries and become especially manifest in his choice of commonplace book quotations. An excerpt from his journal on Nov. 9, 1864 reads:

Thus far this term I have read two volumes of Hallam's *Constitutional History of England*, one volume of Macaulay's *History of England*, nearly all of Lord Chesterfield's *Letters to his Son*, "Seven Stones" and a few extract from various authors. Nearly two weeks of my time were spent very laboriously in a work which Professor McWhorter can testify to. I have also read some logic, principally that part which relates to Fallacies.

I make it a point to attend the Gymnasium regularly between 4 and 5 P.M.

Sterling displays an evident (and characteristic) delight in cataloguing and numbering the *amount* of work he's accomplished—not the ideas that he had encountered or been inspired by, but rather documenting the sheer size of it all. A later entry from May 10, 1865 notes: "During the last term, I have accomplished an immense amount of work, have read 11,000 pages, a greater number than I read the first term." Furthermore, there is almost a suppressed delight in the laboriousness of his study: instead of bemoaning the amount of work he has undertaken, he seems to boast about how much he has accomplished, backing up his assertion with the evidence that "Professor McWhorter can testify to (it)."

Many of Sterling's own journal entries elaborate his notions of subjugation to intellectual labor, which are encapsulated in his commonplace book quotations. For example, a diary entry on June 2, 1865 depicts his engagement with his academic labor as a performance or ritual:

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...Although I have not accomplished very much in the way of reading thus far, yet I trust that my time has not been misemployed. I am doing *several things which I tell no one of, in order to remedy a deficiency of my nature*. I have no doubt, in fact I know, that others have done the same thing as I shall describe, who had no such blemish in their intellectual *nature* and who afterward have been amply rewarded. Between 4 and 5 P.M. I go to gymnasium, after which I indulge in a semi-bath. At 5 P.M., precisely, I read over three or four times a passage from some eloquent speech of half a page in length, and see how nearly I can repeat it. I keep reading and repeating in my chair till I have it pretty well at my tongues tip, when I rise and declaim it in the most *natural* manner possible. I continue this exercise until 6 P.M. when, at the summons of the college bell, I hasten to supper. [emphasis mine]

Sterling's focus on secrecy or "telling no one" seems to cover over the shame of the "blemish" or "deficiency." He believes very strongly, however, in the promise that the technology of self-discipline might afford him, in that others have been "amply rewarded." He uses the word "nature" three times (all emphases mine): "to remedy a deficiency of my *nature*"; "who had no such blemish in their intellectual *nature*"; and "I rise and declaim it in the most *natural* manner possible." This self-subjugation emerges a response to the gap between the *expected* self and Sterling's conception of his own self. He must take on such strict self-discipline in order to tame his "nature," paradoxically, in order to develop an intellectually polished self that would seem "natural" or adhere to certain standards of eloquence and intelligence. This interplay of self-submission to labor and the pleasure of self-mastery, then, appears to be a particularly literary one, based in oration and reading practices.

The secret performance of self-cultivation as described in the journal resonates strongly with rituals of Christianity: rising and falling, repeating texts, marking time with the chime of the bell. This connection may not be accidental; in fact, many of Sterling's journal entries and quotations from his commonplace book address devotion to Christian virtues. A journal entry dated May 12, 1868, addresses his inner

conflict experienced in regards to his Christian faith and feeling “not good enough.” He writes, “O! I do wish I could exercise that Faith which I know Mother or Kate or Cordelia does. However I pray for it—I am all the time asking myself Do I want to die / I know I don’t and I feel as if I were really a Christian I should prefer to die.”

Sterling continually compares himself, and his faith, up against measurements which he considers “norms” of faith: the faith of his family members, and the affirmative answer to the question “Do I want to die?” More so than an actual relationship with Christ, or an engagement with Christian values and practices, this journal entry reveals a preoccupation with measuring up to the “norms” or “standards” of faith that surround him, as he admits, “I can’t help sometimes getting off a good joke, little smutty perhaps but I feel all the time as if I were doing wrong [...]” Furthermore, this journal entry represents a confession of weakness that he would not have otherwise revealed: “I believe this is about the first time I have ever written such thoughts in my Journal—I did not intend to make any remarks under this day: my new pen moves
 510 on rapidly tho now.”

Indeed, the coincidence of Christian suffering and masochistic sentiment may not be accidental. Anne McClintock writes in *Imperial Leather*:

Like Christianity, S/M performs the paradox of redemptive suffering and like Christianity, it takes shape around the masochistic logic of transcendence through mortification of the flesh. Through self-abasement, the spirit finds release in an ecstasy of abandonment. S/M shares with Christianity a theatrical iconography of punishment and expiation: washing rituals, bondage, flagellation, body-piercing and symbolic torture. In both S/M and Christianity earthly desire exacts strict payment in an economy of penance and pleasure (158).

Ironically, Sterling employs the trope of the Christian faith in his journal entry to symbolize “normalcy,” standards of faith or lifestyles which he desperately wishes to attain. At the same time, he draws upon Christian themes of ritual recitation and Christ-like suffering to create his own unique sense of subjugation to intellectual labor.

Sterling’s masochism may be more closely aligned with what Kaja Silverman terms “reflexive masochism.” In her analysis of Lawrence of Arabia in *Male Subjectivity at the Margins*, Silverman proposes that Lawrence may have occupied “the sadistic and masochistic positions *simultaneously* rather than *in turn*” (324). She goes on to define reflexive masochism as something that “not only maps out two very different desiring positions at the level of the unconscious, but fosters the production of two contrary images of self—the image of the one who pleasurablely inflicts pain on behalf of the exalted standard which it purports to be, and that of the one who pleasurablely suffers that pain” (325). The intense self-reflection that Foucault proposes in “L’hermeneutique du sujet” lends itself to this particular reflexivity. In this sense, Sterling’s journal and commonplace book, normally tools in the service of the regulation of the self, emerge as richly imagined spaces for reflexive-masochistic fantasy.

Indeed, a May 10, 1865 journal entry by Sterling reflects this slippage from master to

servant: “I have been employed most of the time in out-of-door work, superintending Augustus, our new man. I have done somewhat more than exercising a supervision over him. A good deal of work actively I have been engaged in, such as planting and digging up trees.” Here Sterling both posits himself as “supervisor” but then slips to the status of “supervised” in terms of equally participating in the work. At first, Augustus is “our new man,” implying mastery and ownership of Augustus’ labor. By the end of the passage, Augustus is off laboring elsewhere “otherwise industriously and profitably employed” while Sterling’s own enjoyment of labor is foregrounded, with the satisfied declaration: “My face is fairly black with tan. A good deal freckled.” The curious detail, “black with tan,” may also allude to a fantasized racial identification, or at least the desire to inhabit a black, servant position. In fact, this labor is framed in terms of enjoyment, as he confirms: “The vacation has been most pleasant, perhaps the pleasantest I ever spent.”

Sterling’s articulations of masochism emerge not only through Christian-inspired symbolism and structures of suffering but also through excerpts of love poetry preserved in his commonplace book which further elaborates his particular masochistic paradigm. One such poem, as an example, reads:

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Stand, I pray thee, apart and touch me not!
Thine the world is, mine the world’s despite;
I am darkness, dear, and thou art light;
Thou art strong of heart, while I, God wot,
Now the battle is waxen fierce and hot,
With my weariness should crush thee quite;
For mine armor availeth not in fight,
And in thine I will not cast my lot.

Stand apart! The night meets not the day.
Time will have it thus: approach not even!
Be not mine, who art my life always;
Wait till death be done; and then—in heaven—
Thine shall be the higher heaven, God will!
Stand, I pray thee, apart!...but love me still.

—William M. Hardinge¹⁰

In this poem, the narrator seems situated hopelessly distanced from the beloved: “the night meets not the day. / Time will have it thus: approach not even!” This distancing, however, is also predicated upon the narrator’s self-debasement, saying “I am darkness, dear, and thou are light.” The narrator preemptively imposes distance between himself and the beloved: he commences the poem with the injunction: “Stand, I pray thee, apart and touch me not!” Instead of letting others dictate that the two cannot be together, the narrator imposes the separation himself, taking agency and control into his own hands when the world would strip him of it otherwise. In this vein, Bersani elaborates that “The defeat of the self belongs to the same relational system, the same relational imagination, as the self’s exercise of power; it is merely the transgression

version of that exercise. Masochism consents to, indeed embraces that theft of being which mastery would remedy by obliterating otherness through a fantasmatic invasion of difference" (110). Furthermore, with "waxen fierce and hot" and "crush thee quite," it seems that the very act of abandonment or separation is, rather than cold and cruel, actually quite ardent and passionate. We might also read this poem in conjunction with the earlier maxims which appealed to him—words of wisdom which advocated a delay of pleasure. Thus, we have to read in Sterling's choices of poetry, not necessarily a precise representation of his sexual desires, but rather a sense of desire and passion that is predicated upon distance, rejection and suffering.

In addition to Sterling's masochistic pleasures alluded to in his journal and commonplace book, his choices of love poems reveal an affinity for fluid gender identification. In so doing, he renders the space of the commonplace book as a type of private arena in which he could embrace or enact various gender-couple formations. Sterling's quotations which focused on love often featured a male object of desire—more frequently than quotations addressing a female lover. One such quotation, from Shakespeare, reads, "Thou are to me as secret and as dear as Anna to the queen of Carthage was. *Taming of the Shrew, Scene I.*" Sterling focuses on a declaration of friendship and love between Lucentio and Tranio instead of opting to include Lucentio's proclamation of love for Bianca. Through the extrapolatory reading practices cultivated by the commonplace book, we can see that Sterling appeared to be more interested in the relationship between the two male characters than the male's pursuit of female figures. Cutting the quotation at a specific textual moment reveals his own mark of authorship of his own desires, written through excision.

At other times, he selects quotations that take the viewpoint of a female speaker. An archive of literature, thus distanced from the real world, would delineate a space in which he would be able to freely take on female narrative voices (which long for or love male bodies). One such quotation, drawn from *Othello*, presents a view of love through the voice of Desdemona: "My love doth so approve him / That even his stubbornness, his checks and frowns / Have grace and favor in them. *Shakespeare.*" Interpreting Sterling's taste for sentimental literature or female-identified literature means that we cannot retrospectively impose our framework for what "proper" reading habits looked like, or what "masculine" tastes he ought to have exhibited. His selection of poems, however, demonstrates that he was particularly drawn to sentimental literature in popular magazines that might typically be classified as "feminine."

Examining quotations taken from popular literature provides us with further insight into Sterling's particular literary taste. One quotation taken from *All the Year Round* reads: "With a magnificent scorn upon her lip that would have become an offended goddess." Sterling's selection of such a quotation reveals an aspect of his taste—that he was moved for some reason, by the image of a haughty, disdainful goddess, something that we might term "kitschy" or "campy" in modern-day terminology. Another love poem, extracted from the May 1881 edition of "The Eclectic

Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art",¹¹ focuses on the sentiments of "relief" and "surprise" that accompany a declaration of love: "What makes my heart so wildly throb? / I'm glad, not sorry—yet I sob; / What ails me that I cannot rest? / He told me what I partly guessed." Despite its maudlin character, the quotation itself is concerned with the uses and powers of language, hinging on the performative nature of the declaration—not only because the declaration confirms the "half-guessed," but also the *act* of declaring (or receiving the declaration) itself elicits bodily responses of joy, tears and relief: "A sudden joy affects like grief; / But with joy's tumult comes relief / To feel all fears are set at rest, / As when he drew me to his breast." The poem also depicts a closet-narrative, the immediate rush of relief when that which was harbored inside, only partly-guessed, can finally come fully out, confirmed in its perfectly paired (homo-metric) sameness in the couplet rhyme.

If the commonplace book served as such a critical apparatus for self-discipline and self-development, Sterling's commonplace book became not only a *techné erotiké*, an instrument in the cultivation of the self, but also the very stage and performance space within which he enacted this sense of masochism—subjecting himself to extreme amounts of reading, declamation, and note-taking. By closely tracking tendencies in Sterling's quote collection or identifying odd selections, we find that Sterling's sense of sexuality is not easily identified or classified. However, we cannot simply flag Sterling down as "queer" or "homosocially oriented" because of the mere evidence pointing to his life-long partnership with Bloss. The quotations in the commonplace book add rich dimensionality to the portrait of Sterling's sexual tastes: his reflexive-masochistic habits, his re-scripting of Christian rituals, and varied gender identifications. As we follow Sterling through his reading trajectories, we are left with an intriguing, yet inchoate, mass of pulsions, affinities, and pleasures.

The narratives of sexual archives are woven together in surprising and unexpected ways. The commonplace book, in this instance, traces reading practices not as merely indicative of a type of sexuality, but rather constitutive, itself, of a type of literary masochism which may be subversive of hetero-patriarchal methods of archiving one's past. Derrida, in *Mal d'archive*, writes, "C'est donc la première figure d'une archive, car toute archive, nous en tirerons quelque conséquences, est à la fois institutrice et conservatrice. Révolutionnaire et traditionnelle. Archive *éco-nomique* en ce double sens: elle garde, elle met en réserve, elle épargne mais de façon non naturelle, c'est-à-dire en faisant la loi (*nomos*), ou en faisant respecter la loi" (20). While many of Sterling's maxims literally pertain to economy and the value of saving money, we might also think of saving in a different sense—we might consider Sterling's commonplace book as a space in which to save/spare himself (*épargner*). As Derrida reminds us, the archive is sometimes inseparable and indistinguishable from the law, as we learn from the archive's Greek root, "arkhé," alluding to both "beginning" and "commandment" (commencement et commandement). The commonplace book and Sterling's own private reading practices create a parallel archive with which to resist and even divert the institution (*nomos* or law) of the father, taking on the injunc-

tion to self-discipline and turning it into a fantasy realm of reflexive masochism. Ultimately, at the end of Sterling's life, he refuses to inscribe himself in the traditional bio-patriarchal genealogical progression, both in his choice of life partner and in his decision to not filter his estate through convoluted ties of blood-relationships.¹² By giving all that he had literally saved to an institution of learning, Sterling re-engenders himself as a progenitor of reading and reading practices for centuries of scholars (and, possibly, literary masochists) to come.

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1. To give one example among many, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz examines the effects of reading and a reading culture on sexuality in nineteenth-century America in her book *ReReading Sex*. Although her book addresses pamphlets, vernacular sexuality, urban sporting culture and censorship, she does not include commonplace books in her study.
2. Ann Cvetkovich has discussed queer archives in *An Archive of Feelings*: "Forged around sexuality and intimacy, and hence forms of privacy and invisibility that are both chosen and enforced, gay and lesbian cultures often leave ephemeral and unusual traces. In the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories, memory becomes a valuable historical resource, and ephemeral and personal collections of objects stand alongside the documents of the dominant culture in order to offer alternative modes of knowledge" (8).
3. Many iconic Yale buildings, including the Yale Law School, the Divinity School, the eponymous Sterling Memorial Library and the Sterling Professorships (the highest academic rank at Yale) all were constructed as a direct result of Sterling's gift.
4. For further analysis of male-male friendship (albeit in Victorian England, not nineteenth-century America), see Christopher Lane's *The Burdens of Intimacy*.
5. Unless otherwise noted, all quotations taken from Sterling's commonplace book and journals appear as found; I preserve the punctuation, spelling, and structure as authentically as possible. I have noted any of my own changes to the archived text.
6. Janice Radway, in *A Feeling for Books*, also addresses the effects of the pleasures of reading on subject formation. In terms of the "evidence" of sexuality, Joan Scott notes: "When experience is taken as the origin of knowledge, the vision of the individual subject (the person who had the experience or the historian who recounts it) becomes the bedrock of evidence on which explanation is built. Questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjected are constituted as difference in the first place, about how one's vision is structured—about language (or discourse) and history—are left aside" (400).
7. "Attending to oneself is therefore not just a momentary preparation for living; it is a form of living [...] The final objective of the conversion to oneself is to establish a certain number of relations with oneself. These relations are sometimes conceived on the jurido-political model: to be sovereign over oneself, to exert a perfect mastery over oneself, to be completely 'self-possessed' [...] They are also often represented on the model of positive enjoyment: to enjoy oneself, to take pleasure with oneself, to delight in the self alone" (96).
8. "[...] what might be called 'personal writing': taking notes on the reading, conversations, and reflections that one hears or has or does; keeping notebooks of one sort or another on important subjects (what the Greeks called *hupomnemata*), which must be reread from time to time to reactualize what they contain" (101).

9. Erasmus in *De Copia* advocates not only rigorously storing up quotations, but also organizing these citations under categories for easy reference; recommended categories, for example, included “fables,” “witticisms,” “proverbs,” or “metaphors.” While some of Sterling’s commonplacing practices aligned with the early modern tradition, selecting instructive quotations regarding rhetorical style or wise maxims, Sterling did not organize his book according to the Erasmian model. Hackel muses briefly upon the utilitarian or productive effects of such categorization on reading practices but does not extend her argument to the ideologies of identity that such categories may have reinforced. The filtering of language into each proper category reinforces a nominative fetish, a desire for strict demarcations of one type of genre or another. Sterling’s commonplace book lacks the early modern methods of organization, instead tracing a meandering, desultory trajectory of reading practices—perhaps defying, in its very form, the classificatory obligations of the traditional structure. Print historian Stephen Colclough has argued that the commonplace book, in the nineteenth century, emerged as more of an album or personal scrapbook than a pedagogical tool.
10. Hardinge was a poet who was infamous for his relationship with Water Pater (a friend of Oscar Wilde’s) and Hardinge even went by the moniker “the Baliol Bugger” openly. While space limitations mean that this paper does not concern itself with tracing down every cultural context and source from individual commonplace citations, this particular citation provides a sketch of an example of how such contextualization might prove fruitful. Hardinge’s own background prompts us to ask about the ways Sterling might have read or been touched by in the work of a man who was openly a “sodomite.”
11. Identified through my own research; the quotation was not sourced in the commonplace book, perhaps a nod to his desire to imprint his own authorial stamp on the commonplace book.
12. One poem in his commonplace book, “Rules of Descent in the United States,” by J.D. Davidson, even pokes fun at legalese and at the legal definitions of “linear descent” and “consanguinity.” The poem tries to flex such rules into a metered rhyme, but finally gives up at the end: “This 8th last rule, it seems to me, / Is rather stiff for poetry.” Indeed, Sterling may have been both amused and frustrated by the ways that his affective ties and relationships failed to fit in any neat, metered system. The fact that he selected this poem indicates an awareness that many genealogical and heteronormative ties are pure constructions, set up for the benefit of the legal world.

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