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INTRODUCTION

In 1770 Jean-Jacques Rousseau finished his remarkable autobiography, *The Confessions*, which was published shortly after his death in 1778. In it he resolved to write his life as an example of the modern individual. He claimed that he was “like no one in the whole world” and that his autobiography had “no precedent” and would have “no imitators.” Although he borrowed his title from Saint Augustine’s autobiography, his life story was clearly quite different. It was not the story of a sinner’s search for God and how that life fit into the overall scheme that God had planned for the world. Instead, it was the story of a man who had accomplished much in his life, but who was still troubled by his personal failings.¹

Despite his claims to the contrary, Rousseau’s autobiography did indeed inspire others in the nineteenth century to follow his example, whether consciously or not. Recently historians have begun to focus on the autobiographies of men and women who did not fill important roles in public life but who nevertheless wrote about their individual personal experiences, uncovering aspects of the human personality and views of historical eras that heretofore remained hidden. Mark Traugott, Alfred Kelly, John Burnett, and Victoria Bonnell have assembled collections of autobiographies of working-class men and women in France, Germany, England, and Russia.² Feminist scholars, such as Patricia Meyer Spacks, Estelle Jelinek, Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson, have analyzed women’s life stories by focusing on the genre and its “truth value.”³ In France, Denis Bertholet has written a remarkable study of the entire genre throughout the nineteenth century, situating the pas-

sions and ambitions of the great and small in their social, economic, cultural, and political context.⁴ He followed the path-breaking work of Philippe Lejeune, who studied the autobiographical writing of commercial agents, industrialists, and financial managers, as well as criminals and teachers. He also identified a number of autobiographical accounts produced by men who were attracted to other men.⁵ All of the accounts that he had discovered had been incorporated into case studies and published in medical journals. None of them were unmediated personal expressions, but, despite their disparate origins, these often extremely frank and detailed autobiographies from the nineteenth century expressed the modern conviction that individual lives were worth telling because of their unique sensibilities.

We have translated from French into English eight men's "queer" autobiographies written between 1845 and 1905. They are the ones that Lejeune identified in 1987, and each one addresses the experiences of a man who was sexually attracted to other men. Many of the writers had been charged with a crime, such as public indecency, sexual assault, theft, blackmail, or murder, and while in prison they were asked to write about their lives and the circumstances leading to their arrest. Some of these written confessions served as a means of establishing criminal motives, and the legal experts who elicited them used them to construct prosecutorial arguments.⁶ Other life stories in this collection were initiated by medical doctors, who served as experts in the courts or conducted research on convicts in prison or treated patients in private asylums. Forensic scientists used autobiographies as case studies to illustrate their own theories on criminal behavior, while psychiatrists and neurologists used them in their studies of sexual deviance. In some cases the doctors interpreted the men's lives so heavily that their interpretations cannot easily be separated from the men's own words.⁷ Nevertheless, some of the narratives that the doctors elicited are indeed extended reflections on the childhoods, adolescences, and adulthoods of these men; others, though trun-

cated and selectively edited by the physicians who first made them public, present tantalizing evidence of long-forgotten men caught up in “the making of a complex machinery for producing true discourses on sex,” as Michel Foucault described the process.⁸

In his work *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argued that historians should focus on how the doctors’ implication in “interrogations, consultations, autobiographical narratives, and letters” contributed to “the constitution of a science of the subject.”⁹ As he put it:

Instead of adding up the errors, naivetes, and moralisms that plagued the nineteenth-century discourse of truth concerning sex, we would do better to locate the procedures by which that will to knowledge regarding sex, which characterizes the modern Occident, caused the rituals of confession to function within the norms of scientific regularity: how did this immense and traditional extortion of the sexual confession come to be constituted in scientific terms?¹⁰

For the past thirty years many literary and social historians have studied such personal narratives in the context of the evolving legal and medical attitudes toward homosexuality in the nineteenth century. Foucault’s cautionary words on the topic distill some of our chief concerns in translating and presenting this collection; he emphasized the importance of considering not only the content of the narratives but also the conditions of their production in a “confessional science . . . which relied on a many-sided extortion.”¹¹ Unlike personal diaries or memoirs, which were written voluntarily for one’s own personal use or for future publication, most of the documents in this collection were produced under duress—by men incarcerated in prisons or interned in asylums under the direction of a prosecutor or under the care of a physician. Yet, for the history of science and the study of sexuality, many historians have echoed Foucault’s assertion that the nineteenth century was “an

important time . . . when the most singular pleasures were called upon to pronounce a discourse of truth concerning themselves, a discourse which had to model itself after that which it spoke, not of sin and salvation, but of bodies and life processes—the discourse of science.”¹² As such, we believe that the writing of these men from the nineteenth century deserves a wider audience today at a time when readers are seeking new views on the lives of ordinary men and women from the past, when gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, and transgendered people are looking for the roots of their communities, and when scholars are trying to understand the formation of sexual identities at a crucial moment in the history of modern Europe.

The first autobiography in our collection is by Arthur W——, the pseudonym of Arthur Belorget. Known as “the Countess” in the Paris of the Second Empire, he was the son of a coachman and a dressmaker. As a young man he became the lover of a nobleman who abandoned him after a few years, and thereafter he earned a living as a cross-dressing singer, using a feminine pseudonym and performing in the *cafés-concerts* of Paris. In 1861 he was arrested not for his practice of female impersonation or his liaisons with other men but for desertion and theft. He was tried and condemned to ten years in prison. There he met the man whom he deemed the love of his life—a fellow prisoner named Gustave Engel. In his autobiography Belorget recounts his childhood attachment to his mother, his adolescent experimentations with other boys, and his seduction by the son of a marquis, as well as his career as a performer and his love affairs in prison. His narrative includes a first-person view on aspects of working-class life in Paris, the social atmosphere of the demimonde, the male homosexual subculture, and the underground world of men’s prisons during the Second Empire.¹³ Belorget’s autobiography was given to Dr. Henri Legludic in 1874 when Belorget was incarcerated in Angers following his arrest for a public offense against decency. Legludic published it as an appendix to his study, *Notes et observations de*

médecine légale, in 1895. In his preface Legludic emphasized the importance of studying “this psycho-sexual disorder . . . that is not rare and has existed throughout history.”¹⁴

The second section of our study includes autobiographies that were presented as medical case studies, along with the commentaries written by the doctors who collected them. As early as the 1850s Dr. Ambroise Tardieu, the leading expert on “pederasty” in France in the middle years of the nineteenth century, had used case studies to great effect in explaining his theories on the relationship between sexual deviance and crime.¹⁵ One case study that he included in the fifth edition of his work was written by the victim of a blackmail scheme, who described his feelings for four young men with whom he had fallen in love. The subject of this study, which we have included in our collection, gave few details about himself, his lovers, or his affairs (unless these details were deleted by the doctor), but his words were used to support Tardieu’s contention that pederastic men had exaggerated notions about love, sex, and desire.¹⁶

In the 1880s and 1890s other medical experts began to publish studies critical of Tardieu’s theories. They, too, used autobiographical writings to illustrate their own analyses of sexual deviance. Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot and Dr. Valentin Magnan were two of the most influential theoreticians of this new generation of physicians. They included an autobiography by an effeminate professor in their influential study of “sexual inversion” in 1882. This man explained that he had desired men and boys both emotionally and physically ever since his childhood. In their commentary, Charcot and Magnan concluded that he was suffering from “a neuropathic or psychopathic state of the deepest kind.”¹⁷

Two other case studies included in our collection were elicited by Dr. Paul Garnier, who further developed Charcot and Magnan’s theories of sexual deviance in his study on “fetishists,” published in 1896. He presented two men’s life stories—one by Gustave L——, who described his overwhelming desire and admiration for work-

ers' clothing (and the men who wore them), and the other by Louis X——, who took pleasure in the sight and feel of varnished shoes (and the men who wore them).¹⁸

The focus of Dr. André Antheaume's and Dr. Léon Parrot's study of sexual inversion is a young man named Antonio, who had attempted to kill himself in 1905. In a letter to his parents he explained his suicidal depression by describing his irresistible attraction to other young men. His parents committed him to an asylum, and there he wrote about his life, thoughts, and desires as part of his treatment. The two doctors who treated him—Antheaume and Parrot—published their patient's suicide note and his reported personal recollections in the prestigious journal *Annales médico-psychologiques*.¹⁹ They destroyed his notebook and sketches.

Charles Double, whose story is the last “case study” in part two, filled a series of notebooks with his autobiographical writings at the request of Dr. Alexandre Lacassagne, the eminent physician and prolific author at the Faculty of Medicine in Lyon. Lacassagne intended to publish them, along with other materials that he had collected from the men whom he had examined in the prisons of Lyon, but he never completed his book. Instead, he preserved the materials among his papers. Double's notebooks provide an especially lengthy example of the kind of autobiographical source materials that doctors like Lacassagne were able to collect in the course of their research. Double was an unsuccessful commercial agent who had killed his mother in 1904 in a fit of rage when she threatened to disinherit him. After he was tried, convicted, and incarcerated, Double agreed to participate in Lacassagne's study. The notebooks show that far from simply recounting his life, Double was able to use this forum to counter the theories of the prosecutor and the doctor who had examined him during the course of his trial. While the notebooks contain a gory, graphic description of his murderous act, they also include Double's rather novel explanations for many of the missteps in his life.²⁰

This collection ends with “The Novel of an Invert”—an auto-

biography that was sent by an Italian man to Émile Zola, the well-known naturalist author. Hoping that his life story would provide material for Zola to use in one of his novels, the anonymous writer had composed his autobiography voluntarily. His first letter focused on his heredity, upbringing, and sexual initiation, presenting the material in a way that resembled the case studies that appeared in the medical literature of the era. His third letter was a character sketch, much like the ones that Zola and other authors are known to have made in the process of writing their novels. In between he described two significant love affairs—one in which he had engaged during his military service, and another one that he had experienced in his youth when he was seduced by one of his father's business associates. Zola did not use these letters in any of his novels; instead, he sent them to a friend, Dr. Georges Saint-Paul, who gave them the ironic title "The Novel of an Invert." Because this man's letters were not written for legal experts or medical practitioners but for one of the greatest novelists of nineteenth-century France, some contemporary scholars have argued that this text is somehow more authentic; others, however, have pointed out that it is not free from the constraints or influences of the legal and medical discourses. After all, it too was first published by Saint-Paul in a medical journal and then reprinted in a medical treatise, where it was used to illustrate the doctor's theory of congenital "inversion." The book caught the attention of the Italian letter writer himself, who then contacted the doctor and provided him with additional details about his life.²¹

We believe that all of these autobiographies give remarkable insights into the lives of ordinary men who were emotionally and sexually involved with other men at a time when criminologists and sexologists were just beginning to develop modern concepts of sexual identities. The men's views of their own lives did not always dovetail neatly with the dominant psychological theories, although the legal experts and medical practitioners clearly thought that they were useful illustrations. Therefore,

even though the experts used these autobiographies to strengthen their arguments, the writers themselves used them as a means of self-expression. As Foucault has argued so persuasively, the dominant legal and medical discourses on sexuality in the nineteenth century contained within them the seeds for an alternative understanding, which in many ways was quite subversive.²² More recently, Harry Oosterhuis has demonstrated that all over Europe men who sought out other men for intimate relationships recognized the medical literature as a place where they could tell their stories to an audience that was, if not always sympathetic, at least open-minded. In fact, in his work on Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Oosterhuis has shown that the upper- and middle-class patients of this famous Viennese psychiatrist influenced him as much as he influenced them.²³

Our aim in translating these eight autobiographies is to let the words of these men from a different time and place speak for themselves as much as possible on questions about homosexuality and effeminacy, romance and tragedy, fetishism and passion, love and desire, and crime and punishment. Autobiographies have been used as sources in historical investigations, in the social sciences, and in literary analyses. For some who study the genre, the authors' intentions are key, whether the aim is to confess, to justify one's actions, to aestheticize one's experiences, or to trace one's psychological development. For others the dynamics of the texts are preeminent and each narrative of the self is created anew in its interaction with readers, not revealing the truth of an "I" but the uncertainties of a contingent discourse.²⁴ While we do not make claims for the unmediated "truth value" of these autobiographies, we do believe that their encounter with a new community of readers is imperative, and we urge our readers to enter into what Lejeune has called "the autobiographical pact" — a kind of imaginative collusion with the thoughts, words, and deeds of long-dead individuals.²⁵ These stories are worth reading not only on their own account but also because they provide documentation of the lives

of ordinary men in the nineteenth century—of their family backgrounds, their social and sexual relationships, their problems with their families, the police, the criminal justice system, and the medical profession. These men—and many more who have remained silent far too long—have had a profound, widespread, and lasting influence on the development of modern sexual identities.