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From Irogoto to Seiyoku: Sexuality, Erotic Culture, and the Modern Subject in Mori Ōgai's 'Vita Sexualis' (1909)

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Abstract

Mori Ōgai's 'Vita Sexualis' (1909) has often been read as a semi-autobiographical account of sexual development, an anti-Naturalist intervention, and a document of changing sexual norms in late Meiji Japan. This article argues that the novel's distinctive achievement lies in staging the emergence of sexuality as a differentiated field of knowledge. The retrospective narrator Shizuka Kanai encounters erotic practices, institutions, and vocabularies that resist a simple opposition between a permissive Edo culture and puritanical Western modernity. Instead, the novel records the coexistence of older terms such as irogoto and kōshoku with increasingly stabilized Meiji categories such as ren'ai, sei, and seiyoku, supplemented by German, English, and Latin terminology. Ōgai's use of Copulationstrieb, foreign words such as "stereotype" and "prostitution," and the Latin title VITA SEXUALIS makes linguistic mediation central to the novel's sexual epistemology. Close readings of Kanai's encounters with commercial sexuality, the Ochō episode, boarding-school homoeroticism, arranged marriage, and the metafictional ending show that his Bildung is less a narrative of sexual liberation than of observation, classification, uncertainty, and self-regulation. 'Vita Sexualis' thus participates in, rather than merely reflects, the Meiji production of modern sexual knowledge.

Keywords: Mori Ōgai; 'Vita Sexualis'; Meiji Japan; sexuality; seiyoku; ren'ai; nanshoku; sexual modernity; autobiography; Bildungsroman

1. Introduction: A Sexual Life Written Retrospectively

Mori Ōgai (1862–1922), a major figure in the modern Japanese literature, worked simultaneously as a writer, translator, physician, and senior officer in the Japanese army's medical service. His years of medical study in Germany (1884–1888) contributed to a career spanning scientific and literary institutions. Published in the July 1909 issue of the literary magazine *Subaru*, his novella 'Vita Sexualis' (Uita sekusuarisu, ヰタ・セクスアリス) prompted the Home Ministry to ban that issue. The ban is important to the work's publication history, but it should not be taken as evidence that the novella itself transformed Japanese sexual discourse or brought an end to Ōgai's official career. The distinction between the novel's literary representation of changing sexual discourse and its demonstrable historical impact is central to the argument developed in this article.

The work takes the form of a retrospective account by Shizuka Kanai, a professor who attempts to assemble a history of his sexual life from childhood memories, school experiences, and encounters with women, interpreting these recollections through the various languages in which he has learned to understand desire. Yet the narrative does not

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unfold as a sequence of sexual encounters. Kanai frequently appears as an observer, reader, or reluctant participant; he expresses uncertainty about what he has seen and what others have felt. At the end, having written 'VITA SEXUALIS' on the cover of his manuscript, he puts it away rather than allowing his son to read it [1]. The framing act of writing, rather than any single sexual episode, therefore defines the central problem of the novella: how can disparate recollections be assembled into a coherent narrative of a sexual life?

Michel Foucault's account of sexuality in his 'History of Sexuality' as a historically constituted field of knowledge provides a theoretical framework for this analysis. However, his distinction between scientia sexualis and ars erotica cannot be applied uncritically as an opposition between Western sexual science and an allegedly timeless Japanese erotic tradition [2]. As the historical scholarship discussed above demonstrates, Meiji sexual culture was shaped by the coexistence and interaction of older Japanese erotic practices, emerging concepts of romantic love, imported medical terminology, and changing social institutions. Rather than treating European sexology as a conceptual system simply imposed upon Japanese society, this article examines how different vocabularies of sexuality interact within Ōgai's narrative. Foucault's approach is therefore useful primarily for directing attention to the historical processes through which sexual experiences become objects of knowledge. The literary analysis that follows investigates these processes through close readings of the novella's language, narrative structure, and representations of sexual experience.

Foucault's characterization of modern Western subjects as "confessing animals" offers a productive framework for understanding Kanai's autobiographical project. In 'The History of Sexuality', confession is not merely a means of revealing an already existing sexual truth but a historically constituted practice through which sexuality becomes an object of knowledge. Kanai's retrospective reconstruction of his sexual experiences similarly transforms disparate memories into a narrative of sexual development. Yet 'Vita Sexualis' also exposes the limitations of this confessional enterprise: the narrator's reliance on historically contingent vocabularies, his uncertainty about the meaning of past experiences, and his ultimate refusal to transmit the manuscript complicate the possibility of establishing a coherent sexual truth. The novella thus both participates in and questions the confessional logic associated with scientia sexualis, challenging a straightforward opposition between Western scientific knowledge and Japanese erotic traditions.

The article begins by examining the historical transformation of sexual vocabulary in Meiji Japan, focusing on the relationships among irogoto, kōshoku, ren'ai, and seiyoku, as well as the significance of European sexological terminology in Ōgai's writing. It then considers how Kanai's retrospective narration organizes childhood memories and educational experiences into a history of sexual development. Subsequent sections analyze the classification of women in commercial sexuality and marriage, the limits of sexual knowledge in the episode surrounding a young woman named Ochō whose feelings Kanai attempts to interpret, and the changing meanings of male–male desire within student culture. Finally, the article turns to Kanai's reflections on self-vindication and sexual restraint, culminating in his decision to withhold the completed manuscript from his son. Throughout the article, the analysis examines how the attempt to narrate a sexual life simultaneously produces and calls into question the categories through which that life becomes intelligible.

2. Overview of the Secondary Literature

The relationship between 'Vita Sexualis' and Japanese Naturalism has long occupied a central place in scholarship on the novella. Gamō Yoshirō interprets the work as an attempt to overcome Naturalism by presenting a protagonist who seeks to control rather than surrender to sexual desire [3]. He nevertheless questions the success of this undertaking,

arguing that Kanai's emphasis on rational self-control prevents the narrative from adequately representing the conflict between reason and desire. Approaching the novella from another perspective, Jim Reichert examines Kanai's memoir as a parody of the Naturalist model of autobiographical writing, while also situating it within the changing sexual culture of Meiji Japan [4]. Nakai Yoshiyuki, meanwhile, directs attention to the novella's literary techniques and thematic organization [5]. Taken together, these approaches raise questions about the relationship between autobiographical disclosure and literary construction. Kanai's detachment from his sexual experiences may be understood not simply as an expression of self-control but also as a narrative strategy that complicates the possibility of presenting sexuality through transparent confession.

A related body of scholarship examines the historical categories through which sexuality becomes intelligible in 'Vita Sexualis'. Takayuki Yokota-Murakami approaches sexuality as a historical construct, challenging the assumption that sexual experience can be understood through universally applicable categories [6]. Ubukata Tomoko draws attention to the temporal distance between Kanai's experiences and their retrospective narration, arguing that earlier forms of sexuality are reinterpreted through the gender categories available in late Meiji Japan without being entirely contained by them [7]. Reichert similarly situates the novella's representation of male–male desire within a period of changing sexual classifications, particularly the increasing pathologization of such desire [8].

These studies demonstrate that the novel's sexual history cannot be separated from the historical transformation of the concepts through which it is narrated. They also raise a further question: how does the retrospective application of modern categories reshape experiences whose meanings were originally less clearly defined?

The relationship between sexual knowledge and the regulation of desire has received particular attention in studies of Ōgai's engagement with European sexology. Arai Masato examines Ōgai's reception of Richard von Krafft-Ebing and identifies a tension between the articulation and suppression of sexuality [9]. While Ōgai's medical writings emphasize the management and regulation of sexual desire, 'Vita Sexualis' explores the possibilities of giving sexuality literary expression. Wang Lan approaches the novella's sexological self-examination from a different perspective, identifying the search for self-knowledge and the education of the next generation as important motivations behind Kanai's undertaking [10]. Her comparison with Zhou Zuoren also situates these concerns within a broader East Asian engagement with Western sexual science. More recently, Daniel Poch has examined the relationship between sexology, gender ambivalence, and aesthetic creativity in 'Vita Sexualis' and 'Seinen', arguing that Ōgai's fiction both explores the creative possibilities of nonnormative sexuality and distances itself from them through appeals to rationality and dominant national ideologies [11]. Although these studies emphasize different aspects of the novella, they collectively reveal the complex relationship between sexual knowledge, self-understanding, literary expression, and the regulation of desire.

The linguistic dimensions of this process provide a further point of departure. Saeki Junko examines the historical transformation of Japanese concepts of love and sexuality, including the changing relationships among older expressions such as irogoto and kōshoku and newer categories such as ren'ai and seiyoku [11]. Sugimoto Masako, meanwhile, investigates the use of foreign words in 'Vita Sexualis', drawing attention to the presence of expressions derived from several European languages within Ōgai's Japanese prose [12]. Building on these studies, as well as scholarship concerning retrospective narration and the historical construction of sexuality, this article examines the literary functions of multilingual sexual classification. It focuses on moments when Kanai moves among Japanese, German, English, and Latin expressions in his attempts to interpret remembered experiences. Such linguistic shifts do more than register the coexistence of different conceptual vocabularies.

They make visible the processes through which uncertain perceptions and experiences are translated into recognizable categories of desire, identity, and social relations. Yet the resulting classifications repeatedly prove inadequate: Kanai can identify commercial sexuality without gaining access to the interior lives of the women he observes, distinguish romantic love from sexual desire without determining which is present, and construct a sexual autobiography while questioning its value as a source of knowledge. The novella thus dramatizes both the possibilities and the limitations of sexual classification through its language and retrospective narrative form.

3. From Irogoto to Seiyoku: Translating Sexual Desire

Ōgai's sexological interests predate the novella. Arai's study places Krafft-Ebing at the center of this medical-literary encounter, while studies of the term seiyoku document its circulation in late nineteenth-century medicine and Ōgai's early-twentieth-century hygienic writing. This chronology matters because the novella dramatizes the use of categories that were already circulating; it does not originate them. The question is how those terms acquire interpretive force in Kanai's narration [9].

The semantic history of seiyoku is especially important because it prevents anachronism. In present-day Japanese, 性欲 is a familiar word that can seem transparent, but its late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century uses participated in the creation of a new conceptual field. Medical writers, educators, moralists, and literary authors increasingly treated sexual desire as something that could be identified, discussed, cultivated, controlled, or pathologized. Ōgai's earlier medical and hygienic writing belongs to that environment. 'Vita Sexualis' therefore does not introduce an isolated literary neologism; it draws upon a vocabulary already circulating across domains and subjects it to literary irony [11,12].

The difference between a lexical item and a conceptual regime is crucial. A word may exist before its social meanings become stabilized. Conversely, older words do not disappear simply because newer categories arise. The late-Meiji field is best understood as layered. Kōshoku can evoke aestheticized eroticism, appetite, or literary traditions associated with figures such as Ihara Saikaku; irogoto can designate erotic affairs or the social world of amorous play; ren'ai increasingly names reciprocal romantic attachment; and seiyoku abstracts sexual desire as a bodily or psychological force. These terms overlap, compete, and acquire new values depending on context.

Ōgai's prose repeatedly foregrounds this layering by refusing lexical purity. Japanese, Sino-Japanese compounds, European loanwords, and untranslated foreign terms coexist. Such coexistence is not simply the mark of a cosmopolitan intellectual displaying erudition. It stages the incompleteness of conceptual translation. When no single term seems sufficient, the text accumulates alternatives. The result is a language that performs modernity as semantic experimentation.

This perspective also changes how one might use Saeki's comparison between Tamenaga Shunsui and Ōgai. Rather than constructing a rigid opposition between Edo eroticism and Meiji sexuality, the comparison shows that the modern category of sexual desire emerges partly through rereading older works in the literature. Ninjōbon becomes an archive against which modern distinctions can be drawn. Ōgai does not abandon the Edo past; he turns it into material for a new historical self-understanding [12].

The title 'Vita Sexualis' itself belongs to this multilingual practice. Latin confers the appearance of scientific universality while at the same time estranging the subject. "Sexual life" is not named directly in ordinary Japanese but elevated into a learned, imported label. The title thereby resembles the narrator's characteristic strategy: bringing intimate material into discourse while placing it behind a screen of intellectual classification. Sexuality is exposed and protected in the same gesture.

The conceptual center of 'Vita Sexualis' lies in the unstable relationship among several vocabularies of erotic life. Saeki's cultural history of love and sexuality emphasizes the semantic distance between Edo-period terms such as kōshoku 好色 and irogoto 色事 and the increasingly modern categories sei 性 and seiyoku 性欲. The point is not that pre-Meiji Japanese lacked concepts for erotic life. Rather, different lexical fields organized experience differently. The emergence and stabilization of seiyoku made bodily desire available as an object that could be discussed in medical, pedagogical, moral, and literary terms with a degree of abstraction that did not simply reproduce the meanings of older erotic vocabularies [11].

It would be misleading to claim that Ōgai invented seiyoku. The term circulated in medical and pedagogical discourse before the 1909 novella, and Ōgai himself had used it in earlier writing on sexual desire. The historically stronger claim is that the novel participates in a period in which seiyoku was becoming increasingly stabilized as a category of sexual desire. This shift matters because 'Vita Sexualis' repeatedly stages the difficulty of mapping new conceptual terms onto remembered experience.

Saeki's reading of Ōgai's use of the German term Copulationstrieb is especially important. She argues that the juxtaposition of seiyoku with a foreign expression reveals an effort to clarify distinctions that contemporary Japanese vocabulary did not yet encode in precisely the same way. In the quotation from 'Vita Sexualis' at the beginning, Ōgai uses the German term Copulationstrieb alongside the Japanese word seiyoku ("sexual desire"). This suggests his recognition that, at a time when the character sei ("sex") was highly polysemous, a foreign term referring directly to sexual intercourse was better suited to conceptual clarification. Today, one would readily use the Japanese expressions sei or seiyoku without hesitation. Ōgai's use of a foreign term, however, indicates that Japanese had previously lacked an appropriate expression for describing sexual relations between men and women in specifically physical terms, or bodily desires devoid of a spiritual dimension. Conversely, this suggests that the conceptual distinction between "body and spirit" in relations between men and women was largely absent from older expressions such as kōshoku ("erotic pleasure") and irogoto ("love affairs") [11].

This passage should not be taken to mean that the foreign word simply supplies a missing concept to an empty linguistic space. Its significance lies instead in the work of differentiation. Copulationstrieb and seiyoku sharpen one another. Ōgai's multilingual prose makes visible the effort to separate corporeal impulse from affective attachment and from the broader social and aesthetic worlds evoked by older erotic vocabulary. Translation becomes conceptual labor.

The older literary world remains present through ninjōbon and other Edo forms. Kanai's sexual imagination is formed not only by European scientific and literary vocabulary but by reading practices inherited from Tokugawa popular culture. This is crucial because it prevents the article from narrating modern sexuality as a one-way Westernization. Modern terms are introduced into a field already densely populated by texts, images, institutions, and social practices. 'Vita Sexualis' is compelling precisely because it stages their coexistence.

A related transformation occurred in the vocabulary of romantic love. Late-Meiji writers and intellectuals increasingly used ren'ai 恋愛 to designate a form of intimate attachment that could be imagined as reciprocal, individual, and potentially connected to marriage. The category did not simply replace koi, jō, or older erotic language, nor can it be reduced to a singular "Christian" import. Rather, ren'ai became one of several terms through which modern Japanese discourse reorganized the relation among intimacy, marriage, desire, and individual choice. The historical novelty lay in the configuration of the field rather than in an absolute cultural absence before Meiji [11] (pp. 15–17).

William N. Ridgeway's formulation captures the lexical difficulty of this transformation and is worth retaining in shortened form:

> "The 'tradition' of romantic love in the West … introduced to Japanese literature in early Meiji, required a new vocabulary and grammar of 'love' and new literary chapters to express it. … The transformation of 'love' was a dissociation of iki, which involved commercialized sexual relations". [13] (pp. 187–188)

Rather than accepting "the West" as a fixed origin, the present article uses this observation to emphasize the work of translation: ren'ai acquires meaning through selective correspondence, differentiation, and literary use.

'Vita Sexualis' repeatedly exploits the friction among these categories. Kanai's memories are narrated from a later position in which he can name distinctions that the younger self did not necessarily possess. This produces one of the work's characteristic ironies: the autobiography retrospectively applies increasingly modern sexual classifications to experiences that occurred at a moment when those classifications were themselves unstable. The "history" of Kanai's sexuality is therefore also a history of the concepts through which that sexuality becomes narratable.

Foucault is useful at precisely this point, provided his framework is not converted into a sweeping West-versus-Japan contrast. The issue is not whether Japan possessed an ars erotica whereas Europe possessed a scientia sexualis. It is that modern institutions increasingly made sex speakable through specialized vocabularies and classificatory practices. In 'Vita Sexualis', those practices are visible in miniature: the narrator examines his childhood and youth almost as if assembling a case history, while simultaneously mocking the possibility that a life can be fully explained by sexual categories. The medical-philosophical gaze is both adopted and ironized [2] (pp. 17–35, 53–61).

J. Keith Vincent succinctly identifies the historical consequence of this argument for modern Japan:

> "'Sexuality' does not pre-exist its oppression. It must be 'invented' first before it can be oppressed, and it is the history of this invention, as the precondition of oppression, that forms the subject of Foucault's History of Sexuality". [14] (p. 192)

Read alongside Saeki, this formulation shifts the question away from whether Meiji Japan was becoming more or less sexually permissive. What changes is the possibility of treating seiyoku as an identifiable force with a history, a vocabulary, and a relation to the self.

This tension is already encoded in the title. The Latin 'Vita Sexualis' gives the manuscript the air of a learned case history, yet the narrative it names refuses the linearity of a developmental diagnosis. Kanai is not a textbook example of normal sexual maturation. His story is full of hesitations, evasions, disgust, curiosity, comparison, and retrospective uncertainty. The supposedly scientific object—his "sexual life"—turns out to be an unstable archive of observations and interpretations.

4. Writing a Sexual Life: Childhood, Memory, and Bildung

The age-based organization of the narrative strengthens this case-history effect. Chapters marked by formulas such as "When I was seven," "When I was eleven," "When I was thirteen," and "When I was fourteen" divide the past into developmental stages. Yet the episodes accumulated under these headings do not form a smooth biological progression. They are heterogeneous memories: a question about parental intercourse, a glimpse of erotic print, conversations among adults, school slang, embarrassment, curiosity, and literary fantasy. The chronological frame promises developmental order, while the contents resist it.

Kanai's retrospective narration also invites comparison with Freud's concept of 'Nachträglichkeit', according to which earlier experiences may acquire new psychosexual significance through subsequent events and reinterpretations, as Freud illustrates through the case of a young girl named Emma in his 'Entwurf einer Psychologie' (1895; first published in 1950) [15]. The adult narrator's attempt to identify the origins of his sexual consciousness raises the question of whether childhood experiences possess an intrinsic sexual meaning or become intelligible as sexual only through the conceptual categories acquired later. In this sense, 'Vita Sexualis' does not simply reconstruct a sexual past; it interrogates the retrospective production of that past as an object of knowledge. While Ubukata situates retrospective narration within the historical transformation of gender and sexual categories in Meiji Japan, Freud's concept of Nachträglichkeit offers a complementary perspective on the temporal processes through which earlier experiences acquire new significance.

This mismatch is one of the novel's most productive formal tensions. A conventional sexual-development narrative might move toward consummation or stable adult identity. Kanai's history instead accumulates scenes of incomplete knowledge. The reader repeatedly expects an event to become decisive, only to find that it is absorbed into another act of interpretation. Sexuality is thus not revealed as a hidden essence but constructed retroactively from many partial signs.

The child's relation to shunga is exemplary. Erotic print belongs to a material culture that precedes the modern narrator's sexological vocabulary. For the younger Kanai, the image may be embarrassing or mysterious; for the older narrator, it becomes evidence of a historical erotic world. The same object therefore occupies two temporal regimes at once. This double vision allows Ōgai to dramatize modernization without pretending that the old and new are cleanly separable.

The novel also connects erotic reading with Kanai's developing self-image. While reading Bakin, Kyōden, and the popular literature associated with love and desire, he turns the gaze back upon himself:

> 「自分の醜男子なることを知って、所詮女には好かれないだろうと思った。」
>
> "I felt I would never be loved by a woman, for I was ugly…". [1] (p. 16); [16] (p. 41)

The sentence is revealing because erotic Bildung here begins not with possession of an erotic object but with an assessment of the self as an object in the imagined gaze of women. Reading produces bodily and social self-consciousness before it produces sexual experience.

The recurrent motif of reading matters for the same reason. Ninjōbon, classical Chinese texts, the European literature, dictionaries, and schoolbooks all become sources through which Kanai imagines desire before or instead of directly living it. His sexuality is mediated by textuality. This is one reason the novel's final gesture—throwing his own manuscript into a book chest—is so apt: books have always been part of the sexual life he is narrating.

The Bildungsroman label should consequently be qualified. The novel certainly follows a young man through stages of education and social formation, but it does not culminate in a reconciled relation between individual and society. Kanai's maturation produces a refined capacity for distinction and a strong ethic of self-control, yet it also leaves him uncertain about intimacy and suspicious of the narratives that claim to explain it. 'Vita Sexualis' is thus a Bildungsroman that exposes the costs and incompleteness of Bildung.

The early chapters of 'Vita Sexualis' are structured by an asymmetry between knowledge and experience. Kanai repeatedly knows that something sexual exists before he understands what it means. As a child he already knows that when a man and a woman marry, they may have children, but he does not know how children are conceived. The gap

is not simply comic innocence. It establishes the novel's central epistemological pattern: sexuality appears as a secret whose existence precedes comprehension.

When an older man asks whether he knows what his father and mother "do at night," the question fascinates and repels him. He wants knowledge, yet the prospect of direct observation feels like profanation. The child therefore remains at the threshold of the sexual scene. This threshold position recurs throughout the novel. Kanai is most often the watcher, reader, listener, or analyst rather than the participant. His sexual biography develops through mediated knowledge.

Erotic images intensify this structure. Shunga and related popular print culture belong to the visual environment of Kanai's childhood and adolescence, but their meaning is not immediately transparent to him. The younger Kanai encounters pictures and books as objects that provoke embarrassment, fantasy, laughter, or curiosity before they become evidence in the mature narrator's retrospective history. The temporal distance between experience and narration allows Ōgai to show how the same object can be reclassified by later knowledge.

This is one reason why the Bildungsroman model remains useful, although it should be understood as a historically specific narrative problem. Kanai's development is not only moral or social maturation. It is an education in distinctions. He learns to read bodies, words, social institutions, and even his own reactions. Yet the novel also destabilizes the conventional teleology of Bildung. The mature narrator does not arrive at a harmonious synthesis. His knowledge is more elaborate, but his uncertainty remains.

The educational setting intensifies the coexistence of cultural and disciplinary languages. Kanai's schooling exposes him to classical Chinese learning, Japanese literary traditions, modern institutional education, and European languages simultaneously. The result is not a simple "hybrid" identity in the abstract. More concretely, it means that erotic experience becomes describable through several partially competing semantic systems. A memory may be narrated with an Edo literary reference, a German technical term, an English loanword, and a modern Japanese category in the space of a few lines.

The novel repeatedly turns this multilingual competence into comedy. Kanai looks up words connected with the body and reproduction in foreign-language dictionaries and becomes fascinated by expressions whose literal or vulgar force exceeds the decorum of the classroom. Such scenes matter because they link the institutional acquisition of Western knowledge with the acquisition of sexual vocabulary. The school is not simply a place where Japan "becomes Western." It is where new forms of knowledge enter everyday language, sometimes seriously and sometimes absurdly.

This emphasis on observation also helps reinterpret Kanai's apparent sexual restraint. It would be too simple to describe him as "frigid" and then use that trait as evidence of Westernized repression. His detachment is a narrative technique and a mode of self-fashioning. The mature narrator repeatedly presents himself as someone who converts potentially erotic situations into objects of analysis. The reader is invited to notice both the power and the defensiveness of this posture. Kanai's intellectual distance protects him, but it also limits what he can know about himself and others.

Thus, the early chapters do not merely prepare later sexual experience. They establish the epistemological form of the entire novel. Sexuality comes into view through fragments: questions, books, images, jokes, rumors, overheard conversations, social customs, and foreign words. The narrator's retrospective task is to assemble these fragments into a history. 'Vita Sexualis' asks whether such assembly can ever be complete.

5. "Faces for Sale": Gender, Commodification, and the Classificatory Gaze

The scene's visual logic also deserves emphasis. Kanai first perceives sameness—faces that appear standardized—before he identifies the economic structure that produces it. Perception moves from aesthetic form to social relation. This sequence resembles the novel's broader movement from sensation to concept: an impression becomes a category only after interpretation. The imported word "stereotype" occupies the hinge between seeing and knowing.

At the same time, the scene should not be romanticized as the moral awakening of a uniquely enlightened observer. Kanai's pity and critique coexist with social distance. The women are described collectively, their voices largely absent. His realization that their faces are "for sale" recognizes their commodification, but his narrative gaze also converts them into a type. The scene therefore stages the ambivalence of modern individuality: the observer criticizes a system for erasing persons while reproducing that erasure in description.

The comparison with marriage intensifies this ambivalence. Kanai's irritation at marriage interviews is not simply a rejection of Japanese custom in favor of Western romantic love. His remarks expose the persistence of family strategy and social exchange within a society increasingly articulating individual choice. Yet he does not provide a fully worked alternative. Romantic attachment itself remains uncertain, as the episode around Kanai's encounter with a young woman named Ochō will show. She is one of the few female characters whose feelings Kanai considers at length, yet his interpretation remains uncertain.

This is precisely where the earlier theoretical vocabulary of "hybridity" can be replaced by a more historically precise account of simultaneity. Meiji intimacy was not a finished synthesis of "East" and "West." It was a field in which household strategies, licensed commercial sex, new ideals of companionate marriage, student cultures, medical concepts, and literary models overlapped. 'Vita Sexualis' gains analytic force when read as an archive of that simultaneity.

Kanai's encounter with commercial sexuality is one of the novel's strongest demonstrations of how modern sexual knowledge is produced through acts of looking and naming. When he enters the Yoshiwara district associated with prostitution, the first thing that strikes him is not an explicit sexual act but the visual uniformity of the women's faces. Ōgai inserts the English word "stereotype" directly into the Japanese sentence:

> 「今まで見た、普通の女とは違って、皆一種の stereotype な顔をしている。」
>
> "Unlike the faces of women I had seen up to that time, these were a kind of stereotype". [1] (p. 52); [16] (p. 33)

The lexical interruption is significant. "Stereotype" names a perception of repetition, standardization, and loss of individuality. The imported word does not merely decorate the scene with cosmopolitan vocabulary; it becomes the instrument through which Kanai interprets the commercial presentation of femininity. His gaze recognizes a social type before he fully understands the institution producing it.

> 「僕にはわからなかったが、これは売り物の顔であった。これは prostitution の双眸であった。」
>
> "I did not understand it at first, but these faces were for sale. These were the faces of prostitutes". [1] (p. 52); [16] (p. 33)

Here again an imported term—"prostitution"—appears inside Japanese prose at the moment of conceptual recognition. The sequence is almost schematic: visual perception, uncertainty, foreign vocabulary, classification. The scene therefore condenses the article's broader argument. Kanai becomes a modern observer not because he ceases to inhabit

Japanese culture, but because he learns to organize what he sees through newly circulating social and conceptual categories.

The historical world behind the scene must be described with particular historical care. Geisha, yūjo, courtesans, and prostitutes should not be treated as interchangeable categories, and Meiji commercial sexuality should not be presented as an untouched survival of Edo. Licensed pleasure quarters carried forward Tokugawa institutions and cultural forms, but they were also being reorganized within the legal, economic, and moral structures of the modern state. What Kanai encounters is therefore better understood as a commercial sexual world in transition.

This clarification strengthens rather than weakens the literary argument. The women's "stereotype" faces mark Kanai's perception of commodification, but his judgment is itself historically situated. The scene is narrated by an educated male observer whose ability to name the women as "prostitution" also distances him from them. Their individuality disappears not only because the institution commodifies them, but because the narrator converts them into evidence within his own sexual history. The modern classificatory gaze can criticize commodification while reproducing another form of objectification.

The arranged-marriage passages complicate the apparent contrast between prostitution and respectability. When Kanai reflects on marriage negotiations, he observes that the daughter's parents appear to be sellers and the prospective groom a buyer:

Before comparing marriage explicitly to buying and selling, Kanai formulates the problem as a mismatch between the inspection of outward appearance and the absence of any equivalent encounter between inner selves:

> 「さて結婚の風俗を見るに、容貌の見合いはあるが、霊の見合いは無い。」
>
> "I realized there was a marriage interview between the parties in terms of looks, but not in terms of souls". [1] (pp. 121–122); [16] (p. 98)

The opposition between 容貌 (appearance) and 霊 (spirit/soul) gives the subsequent commodity metaphor a conceptual context. Kanai's objection is not simply that marriage involves exchange; it is that exchange fails to guarantee recognition of inward individuality.

> 「娘の親は売り手で、こっちが買手ででもあるようだ。娘はまるで物品扱を受けている。」
>
> "It was as if the parents of the daughter were selling her while the groom was doing the buying. The daughter was treated as if she were a commodity". [1] (pp. 121–122); [16] (p. 98)

This passage prevents the novel from being reduced to a moral progression in which Kanai simply rejects commercial sex and embraces respectable heterosexual marriage. The commodity form crosses the boundary between the pleasure quarter and the marriage market. Kanai's modern critical gaze therefore turns not only on women "for sale" in prostitution but on the transactional structure of socially approved marriage.

The parallel also gives greater precision to the novel's treatment of individuality. The prostitute's face becomes a "stereotype"; the marriage candidate risks becoming a "commodity." Both scenes involve a tension between the idea of the individual person and social systems that render women exchangeable. This tension belongs to the broader reorganization of intimacy in Meiji Japan, when marriage, romantic love, household strategy, and modern individualism increasingly came into contact without forming a stable synthesis.

Kanai makes the commodity analogy even more pointed by reaching for Roman legal vocabulary:

> 「羅馬法にでも書いたら、奴隷と同じように、resとしてしまわねばならない。僕は綺麗なおもちゃを買いに行く気はない。」

> "If she were set down in Roman law, the word res would be used, the same as our word for slave. I had no interest in going out to buy a beautiful toy". [1] (p. 122); [16] (p. 98)

The Latin res is another example of foreign vocabulary functioning analytically inside the novel. Kanai uses a learned juridical category to condemn the reduction of a marriage partner to a thing. Here multilingualism is not merely sexological: it becomes part of a wider vocabulary of modern personhood.

A broad appeal to a Christian ideal of love opposed to a Shinto-derived erotic culture is therefore unnecessary. 'Vita Sexualis' itself offers a more complicated structure. Commercial sexuality and marriage are both subject to critique; foreign vocabulary can sharpen perception without guaranteeing ethical superiority; and Kanai's self-positioning as detached observer is itself open to irony. The novel is not the record of one cultural system replacing another, but of multiple regimes of intimacy becoming mutually visible.

6. Ren'ai or Seiyoku? Ochō and the Limits of Knowledge

As mentioned, among the women Kanai recalls in his sexual autobiography is the female figure Ochō, whose behavior toward him becomes the subject of his retrospective speculation. Rather than presenting their relationship as an unambiguous experience of romantic love or sexual attraction, Kanai questions whether Ochō's feelings reflected ren'ai (romantic love), seiyoku (sexual desire), or merely his own imagination. The episode thus reveals the limitations of his attempt to classify another person's emotions and desires.

The phrasing of the Ochō passage is notable because Kanai does not only distinguish love and sexual desire; he also distinguishes "mind" and "nerves." The vocabulary moves between psychological and physiological registers. This oscillation reflects a broader late-Meiji environment in which affect could be discussed through moral, literary, neurological, and sexological idioms. The narrator's uncertainty is thus not merely personal hesitation. It dramatizes competition among explanatory models.

The episode further reveals a gendered asymmetry in the novel's epistemology. Ochō's interior state is the object of Kanai's speculation, but she cannot confirm or correct his categories. Her possible ren'ai or seiyoku is narrated through a male observer's uncertainty. This should not lead to a generalized claim that women in the novel have no agency, but it does require attention to the limits of Kanai's knowledge. The modern classificatory subject is powerful precisely because he can name others, yet the text repeatedly reminds us that naming is not the same as access.

That distinction is important for the article's treatment of autobiography. Kanai's uncertainty about Ochō mirrors his uncertainty about himself. The retrospective "I" can redescribe earlier sensations with terms such as ren'ai and seiyoku, but such redescription remains interpretive. The autobiographical subject is not recovered intact from the past; it is constructed through the vocabulary available at the moment of narration.

In this sense, 'Vita Sexualis' differs from a straightforward confessional model. Confession conventionally promises that speaking sexuality reveals a hidden truth of the self. Ōgai repeatedly undermines that promise. More speech produces more distinctions, but also more questions. The novel can therefore be read as both participating in the modern demand to narrate sexuality and satirizing the assumption that such narration culminates in truth.

The Ochō episode is the point at which the novel most explicitly articulates the instability of modern sexual categories. Kanai retrospectively attempts to interpret a change in Ochō's behavior, but the vocabulary available to him does not resolve the event. He asks whether love had begun to grow, whether sexual desire had moved, or whether he himself had merely imagined a change:

> 「お蝶の精神か神経かの情態に、何か変わったことがあったかどうだか、恋愛が芽ざしていたか、性欲が動いていたか、それとも僕の想像が跡形もない事を描き出したのであったか、僕はとうとう知らずにしまった。」
>
> "In the final analysis, I never knew whether some change had occurred in Ochō's mind or nerves, whether love had begun to germinate, whether sexual desire had stirred, or whether my own imagination had created something out of nothing". [1] (p. 114); [16] (pp. 91–92)

One might describe this as the culmination of differentiation between love and sexual desire. It is more productive to call it the failure of differentiation. Ren'ai and seiyoku are available as distinct concepts, yet the narrator cannot securely map either one onto what happened. The new vocabulary increases analytic precision while simultaneously making uncertainty explicit.

The line "mind or nerves" is equally revealing. Emotional and physiological registers compete with one another, and neither is sufficient. Ochō is not directly accessible to the narrator; her interiority can only be inferred through behavior. Kanai therefore confronts a basic limit of sexual knowledge: classification does not grant access to another person's experience.

This epistemological limit extends to his own sexuality. The mature narrator's retrospective voice is confident in terminology but frequently uncertain in interpretation. The autobiography is full of phrases that qualify, retract, or ironize the conclusions one might expect a "sexual history" to reach. That style is central to Ōgai's challenge to confession. The narrator offers sexual self-analysis while refusing the fantasy of complete transparency.

Saeki's account of the movement from irogoto toward seiyoku is especially useful here because the Ochō passage demonstrates that the semantic shift is not merely historical background. It becomes a formal principle of the novel. Kanai repeatedly asks what kind of feeling or act a particular scene represents. He does not simply experience sexuality; he produces categories around experience [12].

The distinction between ren'ai and seiyoku also complicates a simple opposition between spiritual love and bodily desire. Kanai's uncertainty suggests that the two cannot always be cleanly separated in practice. The modern vocabulary promises differentiation, but lived intimacy remains resistant. This is one reason the novel's title is ironic: a "vita sexualis" implies that sexual life can be isolated as a coherent object, yet the narrative repeatedly discovers that desire is entangled with imagination, status, shame, education, social expectation, and literary memory.

A similar moment of comparative estrangement occurs when Kanai reflects on kissing and recognizes that a practice described in his own cultural environment does not correspond neatly to what he has encountered in the European literature:

> 「接吻が、西洋のなんぞとまるで違った性質の接吻」
>
> "I discovered the kisses described were completely different from those described in European literature". [1] (p. 76); [16] (p. 55)

The importance of this line lies less in establishing an East–West opposition than in showing Kanai using the literature as a comparative archive. Even apparently bodily acts acquire meaning through cultural description.

The same problem appears in Kanai's descriptions of geisha and other women with whom his friends interact. At one point he recognizes what he calls the "seeds" of love or affection while doubting whether *seiyoku* is the appropriate term. Such moments show that the narrator is not applying one stable theory to his past. He is testing vocabulary against memory. The history of his sexuality becomes a history of semantic trial and error.

> 「無論恋愛の萌芽であろうと思うのだが、それがどうも性欲と云っては、この場合には適切でないかも知れない。」
>
> "Of course these were the seeds of love and affection, but they weren't closely related to sexual desire itself". [1] (p. 75); [16] (p. 55)

This is an especially useful companion to the Ochō passage. Kanai does not merely possess two terms and choose between them; he reflects on the adequacy of the terms themselves. The phrase 適切でないかも知れない ("may not be appropriate") makes lexical hesitation part of the narration.

This makes 'Vita Sexualis' unusually valuable as cultural history through literary form. The novel does not provide a transparent documentary record of Meiji sexual practice, nor should it be used as one. Instead, it records the difficulty of conceptualizing intimacy at a moment when the terms themselves were changing. The literature becomes a site where new classifications can be tried, mocked, stretched, and shown to fail.

7. Male Student Culture and the Historical Limits of Classification

The legal chronology is worth stating carefully because it clarifies what is—and is not—at stake. As Pflugfelder argues, certain male–male sexual acts were criminalized in the early 1870s, but the relevant provision disappeared with the new Penal Code that came into force in 1882. Modern Japanese legal history therefore does not support the simple statement that "homosexuality became officially forbidden" across the period represented in the novel. The transformation was more dispersed, involving education, psychiatry, sexology, morality, and shifting ideals of masculinity [17] (pp. 158–172).

This dispersed transformation helps explain the coexistence of apparently contradictory attitudes in Kanai's world. An older generation can react pragmatically to male–male advances; students can organize masculinity around kōha and nanpa identities; intellectual discourse can increasingly condemn same-sex eroticism; and new sexological knowledge can classify desire in terms that imply normality and abnormality. Such contradictions are not evidence of historical inconsistency. They are evidence of transition.

The distinction between coercion and consensual homoeroticism must also remain clear. The dormitory scene is frightening to Kanai because of force and loss of control. It cannot stand as a transparent example of "homosexuality" as such. The same chapter contains broader references to male student culture that require different interpretive language. Treating all male–male intimacy as one phenomenon would reproduce precisely the classificatory flattening that the article seeks to historicize.

Maekawa's work is useful here because it shows that student homoeroticism could be bound to ideals of masculine friendship, elite solidarity, and resistance to feminization. Such meanings complicate a modern identity-based reading. The term kōha could signify hardness, discipline, and masculine seriousness rather than a stable sexual orientation. The historical emergence of heterosexist norms did not instantly erase these older or alternative meanings; it reorganized them [18] (pp. 7–14).

Ōgai's retrospective narrator stands at the intersection of these semantic worlds. He can interpret the past through seiyoku, yet he remembers social categories whose meanings are not reducible to later sexology. The narrative therefore becomes an archive of classification in motion. What later readers might call homosexual desire appears in the text as a set of heterogeneous relations—admiration, pressure, friendship, threat, bodily contact, rumor, and institutional custom.

The section also benefits from comparison with Kanai's attitude toward heterosexual vulgarity. He is disgusted not only by threatening male approaches but by coarse talk about women and reproduction. His self-fashioning is therefore organized around a more

general rejection of uncontrolled sexual display. This pattern supports the argument that his modern masculinity depends less on heterosexuality alone than on cultivated restraint, intellectualization, and the ability to regulate desire.

Such restraint is classed as well as gendered. Kanai repeatedly distinguishes himself from people he regards as vulgar, uncultivated, or unable to control their impulses. Sexual judgment becomes a way of producing social distinction. This dimension should remain visible because it prevents the article from turning Kanai into a neutral witness to historical change. He is an invested participant whose narrative categories defend a particular version of educated masculinity.

The boarding-school episodes place this classificatory problem inside an all-male educational environment. Kanai's encounters with older or more dominant students are narrated with a mixture of fear, disgust, curiosity, and retrospective interpretation. A precise historical account is necessary here. Early Meiji law briefly criminalized certain male–male sexual acts, but that provision did not define "homosexuality" as a modern identity and was removed with the implementation of the 1882 Penal Code. The more consequential transformation for the novel concerns shifting educational, medical, and moral classifications of male–male desire [16] (pp. 158–172, pp. 193–234).

Naoya Maekawa's study of Meiji student culture demonstrates that male homoeroticism did not disappear with modernization. Some intellectual discourse condemned homosexuality, while groups of male students—especially those associated with *kōha* identities—could continue to attach positive value to intense male bonds. By the 1900s these meanings were changing again as romantic heterosexuality, women's education, and new ideals of love, marriage, and family gained cultural authority. The relevant historical model is therefore not tolerance followed by prohibition but unstable coexistence and reclassification [18] (pp. 7–14).

'Vita Sexualis' registers this instability with remarkable precision. Kanai recalls a school world in which sexualized language and bodily intimidation circulate among boys without being reducible to a single modern identity category. In one episode he retrospectively notes that while living in Professor Azuma's household he had not been subjected to sexual stimulation, and then begins "forcing himself" to trace the thread of memory. The very act of recollection resembles an inquiry: the adult narrator searches the archive of childhood for evidence of sexuality.

The mature narrator explicitly describes this retrospective operation as an effort to pull at the thread of memory:

> 「僕は東先生の内にいる間、性欲上の刺激を受けたことは少しもない。
>
> 強いて記憶の糸を手繰ってみれば」
>
> "During the time I lived at Professor Azuma's, I was never pressured by sexual desires.
>
> If I force myself to trace back those memories…". [1] (p. 56); [16] (p. 27)

The image of 記憶の糸, the "thread of memory," is almost a miniature poetics of the novel. Sexuality is not simply remembered; it has to be searched for under the organizing category of seiyoku. The narrator's inquiry actively produces the sequence that the title promises.

The most disturbing scene occurs when an older student's attentions become physically coercive. Kanai's bedding is pulled over his head; hands pin him down; other students enter after hearing the struggle; and he eventually escapes, carrying away his books and ink bottle before refusing to return to the dormitory. The event should not be overdiagnosed from a modern clinical perspective. The text supports the description of an unwanted and physically coercive approach situated within a homoerotic school environment. It does not require the critic to assign a definitive sexual act that the narration itself leaves unstated.

Kanai's books and ink bottle are an almost comic but revealing detail. He escapes bodily danger while carrying the tools of study and writing. The image anticipates the mature narrator's preferred strategy throughout the novel: the conversion of threatening, confusing, or embarrassing bodily experience into intellectual and textual form. Knowledge is both defense and distance.

His father's reaction provides a particularly valuable historical contrast. When Kanai reports the experience, his father is not shocked. He merely acknowledges that "there are such fellows" and tells him to be careful. J. Keith Vincent has emphasized the significance of this generational disjunction: the father's lack of surprise can be read against the later-Meiji pathologization and moral reclassification of male–male sexuality. The episode dramatizes historical transition inside the family rather than presenting it through abstract exposition [14].

「うむ。そんな奴がおる。これからは気を付けんといかん。」

"Hmm. There are fellows like that. From now on be careful". [1] (p. 60); [16] (p. 41)

The understated response is precisely what makes the scene historically suggestive: father and son do not inhabit identical regimes of sexual interpretation.

The student categories nanpa 軟派 and kōha 硬派 further complicate the picture. Their meanings were not simply equivalent to heterosexual and homosexual identities. They combined style, masculinity, educational posture, attitudes toward women, and forms of male bonding. Maekawa's work shows that homoerotic meanings could be reorganized within these student cultures as heterosexual romantic love became increasingly normative. 'Vita Sexualis' is therefore most illuminating when its school scenes are read as evidence of changing social classifications rather than as proof of a timeless Japanese "nanshoku tradition" [18] (pp. 7–14).

The terminology of nanshoku 男色 should likewise be historicized. The term evokes older male–male erotic practices and literary traditions, but modern sexological discourse increasingly reorganized such practices under new categories of normality, abnormality, pathology, and sexual type. The emergence of these categories was gradual and uneven. Ōgai's narrative captures precisely that unevenness: the older father treats the situation pragmatically, the young Kanai experiences fear and disgust, and the mature narrator retrospectively places the event within a vocabulary of sexual desire.

This section therefore reinforces the article's central argument. Sexual modernity in 'Vita Sexualis' is not primarily the imposition of a new rule. It is the multiplication and differentiation of possible descriptions. A school encounter can be understood as bullying, bodily coercion, homoerotic approach, nanshoku-like custom, or evidence within a later sexual history. The novel refuses to collapse those possibilities into one stable label.

The same is true of disgust. Kanai's repeated expressions of repulsion should not automatically be treated as proof that he has internalized a fully formed modern heteronormative psychology. Disgust is a narrated reaction whose historical meaning must be interpreted in context. It may express fear of coercion, class distinction, moral self-fashioning, bodily vulnerability, or later retrospective distancing. Ōgai's irony lies in allowing the narrator to present disgust as evidence of control while making the intensity of that control itself part of the sexual story.

「僕は不愉快を感じて、自分の部屋に帰った。」

"Disgusted, I returned to my room" [1] (p. 57); [16] (p. 28)

Its brevity is important. Kanai converts an obscene conversation into a judgment and withdrawal. The sentence is less evidence of a universal psychological response than of

the narrator's recurrent self-presentation as someone who separates himself from vulgar sexual display.

8. Self-Vindication, Self-Regulation, and the Refusal of Transmission

The concept of self-vindication also illuminates Ōgai's relation to Naturalism. 'Vita Sexualis' has often been discussed against the confessional tendencies of Japanese Naturalism and the emerging I-novel. The work certainly draws on autobiographical proximity, but it refuses the idea that sincerity consists simply in unmediated exposure. Kanai's narrative is too self-conscious, learned, and ironic for that. The text displays intimacy while simultaneously theorizing the act of display.

This difference matters for genre. The novel is autobiographical without fulfilling a strict autobiographical pact, and it approaches the I-novel while resisting its later conventions. Kanai is transparently close to Ōgai in education and biography, yet the fictional name and the philosophical framing preserve distance. That distance is not a defect to be solved by deciding how "true" the episodes are. It is one of the mechanisms through which the text studies the production of a sexual self.

Germany adds another layer to this self-fashioning. Ōgai's scientific training under institutions associated with modern hygiene and bacteriology gave him professional authority in precisely the fields through which the modern state sought to manage bodies and populations. 'Vita Sexualis' translates that disciplinary authority into the literature, but not straightforwardly. The physician's classificatory gaze becomes the novelist's object of irony. Kanai can diagnose, compare, and categorize, yet he cannot eliminate uncertainty.

The learned European references—from Rousseau and Casanova to Michelangelo, Dehmel, and German terminology—should therefore remain, but only where they illuminate this dynamic. They show that Kanai narrates himself through a transnational archive of models for desire, confession, art, and self-discipline. The references do not prove that the West supplies the essence of modern individuality. They show that the modern Japanese intellectual's self-description is produced through selective comparison.

The later chapters shift from the accumulation of sexual episodes toward an increasingly explicit theory of narration. One of the most important passages concerns "self-vindication" and mimicry. Kanai reflects that every work of art may be a form of self-defense or self-justification, comparing writing with the adaptive coloration of frogs and lizards:

> 「僕はどんな芸術作品でも、自己弁護でないものは無いように思う。それは人生が自己弁護であるからである。木の葉に止まっている雨蛙は青くて、壁にとまっているのは土色をしている。草むらを出没する蜥蜴は背に緑の筋を持っている。砂漠の砂に住んでいるのは砂の色をしている。Mimicry　は自己弁護である。文章の自己弁護であるのも、同じ道理である。」

> "I don't believe any work of art can escape the label 'self-vindication'. For man's life is his attempt at vindicating himself. For the life of each and every living creature is a self-vindication. A tree-frog resting on a leaf is green, but a tree-frog resting on a wall is sallow. A lizard appearing and disappearing in a cluster of bushes has a line of green along its back. A lizard living in the desert is sand-colored. Mimicry is self-vindicating. Writing is self-vindicating for the same reason". [1] (p. 131); [16] (p. 107)

This passage's most immediate relevance is autobiographical. If writing is self-vindication, then the sexual history Kanai is composing cannot be a neutral scientific record. It is an act of positioning. The narrator selects episodes, classifies them, interprets them, and repeatedly emphasizes his distance from forms of sexuality he considers vulgar, coercive, excessive, or merely physical.

The concept of self-vindication explains the double movement of 'Vita Sexualis'. The narrator exposes private material and simultaneously protects himself through irony, philosophy, learning, and classificatory detachment. The text is confessional without embracing the ideal of transparent confession. It reveals a sexual past while continuously commenting on the conditions under which such revelation can be made respectable.

Ōgai's German experience enters this structure in a historically specific way. His years in Germany were devoted officially to hygiene and military sanitation, not to sexology narrowly defined. Yet they embedded him in a German scientific and intellectual environment and made German a privileged language of technical precision. In the novel, German words carry both intellectual prestige and comic estrangement. They allow the narrator to name bodily processes while keeping them at a linguistic distance.

This is why the imported terminology should not be interpreted simply as evidence of Western authority. The novel repeatedly domesticates and ironizes foreign words. Copulationstrieb may promise conceptual clarity, but the life it describes remains difficult to classify. "Stereotype" sharpens Kanai's perception of commodified femininity, yet the gaze that uses the word is itself partial. Latin gives the manuscript its learned title, but the text ultimately questions whether the manuscript should circulate at all.

Kanai's impending departure for Germany also functions as a temporal boundary in the sexual autobiography. His youth in Japan is retrospectively organized as a sequence leading toward an adult intellectual identity that will become international and professionally medical. Yet the narrative refuses the conventional Bildungsroman closure in which travel produces mature synthesis. The older narrator, looking back, remains uncertain whether his self-control represents wisdom, temperament, repression, or merely a particular strategy of living.

This uncertainty is crucial to the novel's literary modernity. The mature subject is not presented as the transparent owner of his history. He is an interpreter of traces. His authority comes from the ability to narrate and classify, but Ōgai repeatedly exposes the contingency of those acts. A history of sexual desire is therefore also a history of retrospective construction.

9. Taming the Tiger and Withholding the Manuscript

The tiger image also complicates any attempt to identify Kanai's endpoint as simple asceticism. A tamed animal is not a dead one. Desire remains present, close, and potentially powerful. Control is relational rather than absolute. The metaphor thus offers a more subtle model of subjectivity than the language of repression: the self is constituted through an ongoing practice of managing forces that are acknowledged rather than erased.

The Buddhist reference to Bhadra further disrupts the assumption that self-control is merely a Western or Christian acquisition. Ōgai can articulate disciplined sexuality through a Buddhist image while elsewhere drawing on German science, Latin nomenclature, and the European literature. This is one reason the old binary language of "Western-Christian morality" versus "Shinto eroticism" is inadequate. The novel's ethical vocabulary is itself plural.

The final book-chest gesture is equally plural in its cultural references. Dehmel supplies a German poetic injunction against paternal obedience; Latin supplies the manuscript's title; and the act of putting the manuscript away evokes a material Japanese world of books and family inheritance. Rather than synthesizing these elements into one hybrid essence, the novel places them side by side. The result is a modern subject whose authority depends on moving among multiple archives.

The paradox of publication is therefore structural. Kanai withholds the manuscript from his son, but Ōgai publishes the work for strangers. Sexual knowledge is refused as

paternal instruction and offered as literature. This distinction may be one of the novel's most consequential claims: literature can circulate forms of sexual reflection that family pedagogy or official morality may find difficult to authorize.

The censorship history intensifies that claim without determining it. The state's intervention in Subaru demonstrates that literary circulation was itself contested. Yet the work's survival and later canonization also show that censorship did not settle its meaning. The book chest, like the banned magazine issue, becomes an image of temporary containment rather than permanent silence.

The ending gathers the novel's conceptual threads into two striking images: the tamed tiger and the discarded manuscript. Kanai describes sexual desire not as something extinguished but as a force brought under control:

> 「自分はその性欲の虎を馴らして抑えている。羅漢に跋陀羅というのがある。馴れた虎を傍に寝かして置いている。」
>
> "I have tamed my tiger of sexual desire and controlled it. Bhadra was one of Buddha's disciples. He slept beside the tiger he had tamed". [1] (p. 152); [16] (p. 127)

The phrase 性欲の虎 (seiyoku no tora), "the tiger of sexual desire," is an ideal concluding emblem because it reveals how far the narrative has moved from the simple opposition between repression and liberation. Desire is neither denied nor celebrated. It is recognized as a force, given a name, and disciplined. The endpoint of Kanai's sexual Bildung is regulation.

This does not mean that the novel straightforwardly endorses repression. The image is self-dramatizing and faintly comic. Kanai casts himself as a wise ascetic who can sleep beside a domesticated beast, but the elaborate metaphor also suggests how much narrative energy is required to demonstrate control. Sexuality has become an object from which the modern subject defines his distance.

The final decision concerning the manuscript makes that distance even more paradoxical. Kanai has originally imagined writing his sexual history partly in relation to his son's education. Yet after completing the account he hesitates. Would a son who became like his father be happy or unhappy? He recalls Dehmel's injunction not to obey the father and finally decides that he does not want his son to read the manuscript:

> 「若しこれを読んだ子が父のようになったら、どうであろう。それが幸か不幸か。それも分からない。Dehmel が詩の句に、『彼に服従するな、彼に服従するな』というのがある。我子にも読ませたくはない。金井君は筆を取って、表紙にラテン語で、VITA SEXUALIS と大書した。そして文庫の中へばたりと投げ込んでしまった。」
>
> "Would the boy be happy or unhappy?" He was not sure. Dehmel has a line in a poem: "Don't obey your father! Don't obey him!" He did not want to let his son see his manuscript. He wrote VITA SEXUALIS in large Latin letters on the cover. "He heard the thud of his manuscript as he hurled it inside a storage chest for books". [1] (pp. 152–153); [16] (p. 128)

The irony is profound. The history of sexuality has been written, but transmission is refused. The sexual subject has learned to narrate himself and then interrupts the pedagogical circulation of that narrative. This is not a retreat into silence in any simple sense: the reader, of course, possesses the text. The fictional act of withholding becomes the device through which the published novel reaches its audience.

The internal refusal gains additional resonance from the external publication history. The July 1909 issue of Subaru containing 'Vita Sexualis' was banned from sale and distribution, and the work was not published as a separate volume during Ōgai's lifetime. It would

be excessive to turn the fictional ending into a prophecy of censorship, but the juxtaposition is nonetheless suggestive. Inside the novel, the author of a sexual history doubts whether it should circulate to the next generation; outside the novel, state authority restricts its circulation in the public sphere.

The ending also returns to the European genealogy of sexual autobiography invoked near the beginning. Kanai has reflected on Rousseau and Casanova before deciding that he might write a history of his own seiyoku. These references do not simply prove that a Western confessional genre has been imported into Japan. They become objects of comparison through which Ōgai asks what a sexual autobiography can claim to know. Rousseau's confessional boldness and Casanova's life devoted to desire form exaggerated models from which Kanai differentiates himself.

Kanai's comparative literary reflections also explicitly resist treating erotic representation as uniquely Japanese:

> 「芸術に猥褻な絵などがあるように、Pornografie はどこの国にもある。」
>
> "Just as many erotic drawings appear in the fine arts, so pornography exists in every country". [1] (pp. 28–29); [16] (pp. 10–11)

This sentence is particularly valuable for the revised argument because it works against the tendency to make Japanese erotic culture culturally exceptional. Kanai himself places erotic representation within a transnational field. The foreign term 'Pornografie' again marks classification through translation, but the conclusion is comparative rather than civilizationally hierarchical.

The result is a deliberately anti-heroic sexual autobiography. Kanai does not narrate conquest, liberation, or scandalous authenticity. He narrates the acquisition of categories and the cultivation of distance. Yet the very need to write the history exposes the persistence of the object he claims to have mastered. The tiger is tame, but it remains beside him.

For that reason, 'Vita Sexualis' should not be treated merely as a document of Meiji prudery or as a nostalgic recollection of Edo erotic freedom. Its formal achievement lies in dramatizing the historical production of sexuality as a field that can be observed, named, narrated, and regulated. The manuscript in the book chest is the material emblem of that process: sexual knowledge has become textual, but its meaning and proper circulation remain unresolved.

10. Conclusions

'Vita Sexualis' is valuable for the cultural history of sexuality precisely because it does not provide an unmediated record of Meiji experience. Kanai's narrative is selective, retrospective, and shaped by the perspective of an educated male observer. Those limitations do not deprive the novella of historical significance; rather, they reveal how the effort to describe sexual experience depended on historically changing words, institutions, and assumptions. In this respect, the novella complicates Foucault's distinction between ars erotica and scientia sexualis, demonstrating that different forms of erotic and sexual knowledge coexist and intersect rather than conforming to a straightforward opposition between Japanese traditions and Western scientific discourse.

The distinction between irogoto, kōshoku, ren'ai, and seiyoku is therefore not a story of simple replacement. Japanese and European expressions coexist within Kanai's language, permitting new distinctions while also exposing their uncertain application. His recollections show that an apparently precise category may organize experience without resolving what another person felt or what an event meant to the younger self. Freud's concept of Nachträglichkeit further illuminates this retrospective dimension: sexual

meaning is not necessarily inherent in an earlier experience but may emerge through its subsequent reinterpretation.

This tension takes different forms across the episodes examined here. The descriptions of women in commercial sexuality and arranged marriage reveal how classification may expose objectification while repeating it. The Ochō episode reveals the limits of inference about another person's feelings. The boarding-school scenes show why coercion, male intimacy, student identity, and later medical categories must not be collapsed into a single label. Together, these encounters demonstrate not one general failure of language, but several distinct limits on what sexual classification can establish.

Kanai's final claim to have tamed the "tiger of sexual desire" and his refusal to give his manuscript to his son bring these questions back to autobiography itself, anticipating aspects of the later Taishō-era shishōsetsu (I-novel), in which readers often understood the author's portrayal of private life as autobiographical. His undertaking recalls what Foucault describes as the modern imperative to confess one's sexuality, yet the resulting narrative does not establish a definitive sexual truth. Kanai can organize his memories into a sexual history, but he cannot guarantee that this history discloses a complete understanding of himself or supplies a model for someone else. Ōgai's achievement lies in making the historically changing language of sexuality inseparable from the limits of self-knowledge. A vita sexualis can be written; whether writing it makes sexual life fully knowable remains unresolved.

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