

Homosexuality as (Anti)Illness: Oscar Wilde's  
*The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Gabriele  
D'Annunzio's *Il Piacere*

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Where religions once demanded the sacrifice of bodies, knowledge now calls for experimentation on ourselves, calls us to the sacrifice of the subject of knowledge.

—Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*

Man's domination over himself, which grounds his self-hood, is almost always the destruction of the subject in whose service it is undertaken. . . .

—Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer,  
*Dialectic of Enlightenment*

An alternate German title of this essay, "The Birth of Fascism out of the Spirit of Decadence," betrays a certain enslavement to causal models in the argument that follows: try as I may, I cannot rid it of the conviction that an overwhelming incitement to *literary* fascism in Europe was the terror of the dandy—the rapidly cohering fantasy that Western high culture was falling increasingly under the mastery, the custodianship of the effeminate male, the connoisseur, the effete classicist—if not of the dandy per se, then of the liminal male whose alterity clustered about the signifier "dandy" and its pictorial representations. Oscar Wilde did nothing to quell this anxiety; one can argue rather the contrary, that he recognized the rapid coherence of this distinctly nineteenth-century fear and

played it, as it were, to the hilt. But *The Picture of Dorian Gray* does far more than work upon upper-class anxieties of gender/sexuality and cultural transmission. The text stands as indictment against the entire social machinery mobilized to define and destroy the "dandy," which, by the time of the writing of *Dorian Gray* (1891), already implied the "homosexual" or "invert."<sup>1</sup> Recent critical studies have so thoroughly set out the case for a radically progressive Oscar Wilde, a "subversive" Wilde, a Derridean Wilde, that there appears to be little terrain left to cover in the commentary on Wilde's place in postmodern theory.

Jonathan Dollimore outlines the arguments succinctly: "It is said that Wildean inversion disturbs nothing; by merely reversing the terms of the binary, inversion remains within its limiting framework: an inverted world can only be righted, not changed. Moreover . . . Wilde's paradoxes are superficial in the pejorative sense of being inconsequential, of making no difference." And contrarily: "Wilde's inversions, operating to subvert a deeply conservative authenticity and the deep subjectivity on which it is premised, were overturnings in Derrida's sense" (64-65). The trend toward the second stance, toward reading Wilde in terms of either poststructuralist theory or postmodern chic, is understandable. First, Wilde's public persona and behavior made all the more visible (and perhaps more possible)<sup>2</sup> the coalescence of a "homosexual" type, still very much a novelty in Britain in the 1890s but no less threatening for that: "one of the many reasons why people were terrified by Wilde was because of a perceived connection between his aesthetic transgression and his sexual transgression" (Dollimore 67). The trial for "gross indecency with another male person," in 1895, brought out some of the most brilliant one-line reversals<sup>3</sup> ever transcribed in a court of law, and there is a logical desire to conflate Wilde's textual production with his public performances: "Wilde's transgressive aesthetic subverted the dominant categories of subjectivity which kept desire in subjection, subverted the essentialist categories of identity which kept morality in place" (Dollimore 68). Second, the historical appearance of Wilde on the scene seems to offer anchor to the very concept of the homosexual as it "arrived" in England from the Continent in the 1890s, in particular with the first English translation of Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1892) by Charles Chaddock and with Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (1897). Theory and practice are thus fused flawlessly, in retrospect, and Wilde becomes *the* homosexual par excellence.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, finally, Wilde “fits” a desideratum of modern identity politics of “subaltern” groups—as a forefather, a figure whose owning and positive valuation of identity in the face of negative cultural stereotypes and open persecution secures a place in a sort of modern hagiography. The genuine need among identitarian sexual-political “minorities” for an efficacious politics in confronting multiple life-threatening institutions and practices (religious, pedagogical, political, governmental, economic, or otherwise) has meant that Wilde’s “inversions”—often witty reversals of his interlocutor’s previous remark—have served as a tacit benchmark of a common “gay” aesthetic, whether actively “political” or not.<sup>5</sup> Inasmuch as recent intelligent criticism on Wilde has emerged largely as a result of the post-Stonewall rise of “homosexual” minority politics in Europe and the United States, it is unsurprising that celebration of Wildean wit and subversive power has been the order of the day.<sup>6</sup> Feminist criticism and African-American studies experienced this jubilation in the archaeology of erased literary voices in the 1960s and 1970s, and the coming of age of “gay and lesbian studies” in the 1980s deserved its moment of essentialist pleasure as well, though it was contested nearly as soon as it occurred.

The slippage from linguistic “inversion” to “homosexuality” (sexual “inversion,” in Ellis’s terms) to social “subversion”—valued positively or negatively—was every bit as active in 1895 as in 1995, but rarely does the conflation of *Dorian Gray* with “Wilde” in the modern gay rights movement base itself in a close reading of the novella. On the contrary, if the text is considered, it is as a resource for buttressing an interpretation already long settled. There is no question, in my view, that *Dorian Gray* implicitly mounts an attack on Victorian violence against people who would engage in same-sex sexual contact. Indeed, I argue, beyond recent criticism, that the text enjoins the reader, in the final scene especially, to *desire to see* the homosexual act and then entraps the reader in a position of complicity with the deformation of, and violence against, Dorian, much as does Herman Melville’s novel of the same year, *Billy Budd: Foretopman*, does through the body of Billy, in setting “mantraps under the daisies,” or Marcel Proust in “La race maudite” of *A la recherche du temps perdu* (1921-22).

But there is a tension between the claim that Wilde’s “transgressive aesthetic subverted the dominant categories of subjectivity” and the use of Wilde to ground an identitarian “homosexual” politics. Wilde’s resistance in *Dorian Gray* to the very conceptual

apparatus through which others sought to consolidate the “homosexual” taxonomically—namely the depth model of subjectivity (a resistance recanted by Wilde in some respects in *De Profundis*: “the supreme vice is shallowness”)—squares off decisively against not only early psychoanalysis and a whole host of other interpretive frameworks, in particular those of criminology, medicine, and jurisprudence, but also against the “Uranian” or “homosexual” rights movements that were developing during Wilde’s last decade. Wilde’s positive placement within antagonistic binaries of the current century’s gay nineties—homosexual/heterosexual or queer/nonqueer—belies *both* the novella’s essential foreignness to a comfortably commodified “gay” identity *and* the conservatism implicit in the positioning of the narrative voice itself. Because so much enlightened criticism has had to fight the abundant currents of “homophobia” in Wilde studies, some of which is leveled very directly, some in charges of superfluosity and triviality (as above), very little attention is paid to this conservatism,<sup>7</sup> essentially to the attempt to stake out high culture as the province of the dandy, of the (nonheterosexual) male, “he who has crushed grapes against his palate,” as Lord Henry Wotton names the pursuit of a “new Hedonism” in aestheticism (Wilde 86). In claiming a certain epistemological privilege implicit in this castrative act of grape-crushing, Wilde does move in the direction of high modernist or perhaps postmodernist schemas of subjectivity but in a manner that conserves a stable position for narration. This narrative position, scarcely considered in the critical literature, constitutes the gauntlet Wilde casts down for fellow authors, such as D’Annunzio, who are then compelled to dislodge the dandy from such a position and to replace him with a clearly heterosexually inclined male figure, such as Andrea Sperelli-Fieschi, Conte d’Ugenta, in *Il Piacere*. These are pitched cultural wars, fought out through prose fiction, but their animosities are never fully realized or unambiguous because part and parcel of literary production, because it is never a matter of sovereign agents executing strategic maneuvers consciously.

Wilde’s reaction to the cult of the aesthetic was of two minds: a resistance to its lack of social-critical bearings and a fealty to its insistence on the primacy of iconicity in the human imaginary. *Dorian Gray* unfolds very much as a struggle between acknowledgments of the power of beauty—of form, or fetish—and of the power of socialization, but the ground of that struggle is the body

of the young male, of Dorian, who comes to function both as icon, that is, as an enabling aesthetic *fetish* in the text, and as a social experiment in *homosexualization*. The structure of that struggle is fully that of a homosocial, implicitly a homosexual, triangle. As in Musil's *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törleß* (1906), two older males, here Basil Hallward and Lord Henry, take a younger male as object and as protégé: while the artist Hallward paints a portrait of Dorian and appeals to his vanity, Lord Henry "would seek to dominate him" (35). Because Dorian, like Törleß/Basini, moves between subject and object status, between the "picture" of Dorian and Dorian himself, there is a movement in the text between an invitation to analysis (taking the text as object) and an aggression toward the reader, in moments in which analysis is not possible. That "homosexual" content inheres in those moments of exclusion has until recently rarely been the conclusion in the critical literature, but it is unmistakable in *Dorian Gray*: the "homosexual" is precisely this rebus of the active-passive male, the oscillation (in Musilian terms) between *vivisezieren* and *stilisieren*, between psychoanalysis and aestheticism: in short, a sort of *fort-da* game with fetish. Musil will later make this threat of the *disappearance* of the fetish (sometimes but not always identical with *phallus*) more explicit in its connection to anal intercourse, in which the tool of the analyst, the penetrative male subject, becomes "lost" in its object; in Wilde, unlike in Stefan George, for example, phallic plenitude in the epebe is consistently interrupted by—not affirmed by—violent actions on the part of the epebe.

On the other hand, however, Wilde's text does offer a vantage point from which to observe the chain of events *without* epistemological exclusion, a point very near to Lord Henry's but fully consistent only with that of the nearly omniscient narrator.<sup>8</sup> If the reader is one who has in fact "crushed grapes against [his] palate"—one who "knows" what the Greeks knew—then one is aligned with this position of invulnerability, of privilege. "Greek" sexual acts (between older and younger male) are elided with ancient Greek culture, which comes to stand for a mastery of Western culture generally—a mastery, it is implied throughout the text, that can only be obtained by entering the terrain of the "unnameable vice," "the love that dare not speak its name," "the unspeakable crime against nature," "the unmentionable practice of the Greeks," or any other of a score of circumlocutions for male-male sexual acts of the nineteenth century. This narrative position constitutes a fantasized position of

cultural mastery in a specifically *masculinist* mode. This is not to trivialize the cultural significance of Wilde's texts or to impute to them a politically undesirable set of "motives," but rather an attempt to view the mechanics of various texts together, to read as dialogic texts that are not often considered together in literary histories.

The introduction of Dorian could hardly be a more fitting slap in the face to aestheticism: why not insist that the *male* subject submit to the reifying forces of aestheticism? "A young Adonis, who looks as if he were made out of ivory and rose leaves," "finely curved scarlet lips, his frank blue eyes, his crisp gold hair," "a Narcissus," "the air of a young Greek martyr," "some brainless, beautiful creature who should always be here in winter when we have no flowers to look at" (6, 7, 17, 18)—the scrutiny and specularization of the young male begin at full force: "He is a suggestion, as I have said, of a new manner. I find him in the curves of certain lines, in the loveliness and subtleties of certain colors. That is all" (13). The effect of this repetition is to undermine its intelligibility—the very frontal presentation of this body, or of its various parts, suggests that Dorian's status as object, as *re*-presentation, is at stake here, as the phenomenon of objectification itself. It may seem disingenuous to credit the Wildean text rather than the Baudelairean with this theoretical move. Although the poet in Baudelaire is "maudit" and suffers a corporeal "atonie," the structure of desire/disgust that plays out in the space of *woman* suggests very little that the poet's body assumes the status of object or fetish. The male poet owns consciousness, the female *passante* owns body. In Wilde, the male body is announced openly as fetish, as a butler might announce the arrival of a guest in a novel, and the association is ostentatious: "a dream of form in days of thought" (12).

The interchangeability of Dorian with flowers or with the innumerable *objets d'art* listed in the text—filler for this "aesthetic" novel demanded by the publisher—is confounded by the effect he has upon both men and the effect they have upon him. Dorian awakens in Basil a "curious artistic idolatry," which "the world might guess . . . and I will not bare my soul to their shallow, prying eyes. My heart shall never be put under their microscope" (13). Basil's desire for Dorian, unattested to himself and indicated circuitously in the novel, surfaces in wonderfully erotic substitutions of Dorian with the portrait: "you shall be varnished," Basil exclaims (27).

But the narrator also indicates, without direct nomination, that Basil's is a love of one male for another:

The love that he bore him—for it was really love—had nothing in it that was not noble and intellectual. It was not that mere physical admiration of beauty that is born of the senses, and that dies when the senses tire. It was such love as Michel Angelo had known, and Montaigne, and Winckelmann, and Shakespeare himself. (104)

What might seem to the modern reader a tiresome defense of “homosexual” love based on a canon of artistic forebears would have struck Victorian eyes much more as indirection, yet the desire that would refuse to be put under the microscope is very much under surveillance here, all the more so as a result of this obscurantive naming of the “love” itself: *non nominandum*. The structure of the novel, in fact, allows Dorian's courtship of Sibyl Vane to play out under the reader's gaze, whereas his subsequent sexual encounters are all obscured, rendered all the more matters of interest for their having been obscured. Readerly desire thus becomes caught up in the injunction not only against homosexual acts but also against viewing or speaking of such acts.

This dialectical play of influence and effect produces in “Dorian” a sense of self-experimentation: he takes himself as the object to be vivisected, as had Lord Henry: “He had always been enthralled by the methods of natural science, but the ordinary subject matter of that science had seemed to him trivial and of no import. And so he had begun by vivisecting himself, as he had ended by vivisecting others” (51). The metaphor of vivisection, coursing through so many literary and philosophical texts at the close of the nineteenth century, suggests an investigation of “soul,” as is explicit in *Dorian Gray*, but the grounding of this investigation is in the body: to vivisect is to lay open the interior of the body while the subject is still alive. Thus an advantage here to expanded conceptualizations of “object relation” and “fetish” over those of “narcissism” and “phallus” is that they make the synchronic transition from a muse (or diva) to ephebe, and back again, more intelligible: in the case of the former, because the construction of the subject always entails multiple predicates—artifacts of all manner, visual images and linguistic representations, as well as human bod-

ies—and with the latter pair, because “fetish” suggests physical as well as representational presence.

Dorian’s first experiment, upon the actress Sibyl Vane, seems to open onto a condemnation of aestheticizing, of fetishizing human bodies, even as it connects with various strands of apparently misogynistic discourse elsewhere in the text. “A little flowerlike face, a small Greek head with plaited coils of dark brown hair, eyes that were violet wells of passion, lips that were like the petals of a rose” (46): Dorian’s description reproduces the erotic aesthetics of his tutors. The result of their having made him an object is that he now holds others to be objects. But the calculus is a little more complicated when one considers Sibyl’s place in the text with respect to its various quips about “female” behavior. Lord Henry comforts Dorian that this “little actress” who killed herself when rejected by Dorian is best considered as “a strange lurid fragment from some Jacobean tragedy. . . . The girl never really lived, and so she has never really died. To you at least she was always a dream, a phantom that flitted through Shakespeare’s plays . . .” (91). In her performances as Imogen, Desdemona, Rosalind, and Juliet, Sibyl remains purely an aesthetic phenomenon for Dorian: “Mourn for Ophelia, if you like. Put ashes on your head because Cordelia was strangled. . . . But don’t waste your tears over Sibyl Vane. She was less real than they are” (91). This resolve to place the female into the realm of Art (or the Symbolic) is disrupted as often as it is invoked, however, and most compellingly by the re-entry of the Real, the body of the dead girl, which is autopsied.

This tension between Real and Symbolic, however, shifts away from the fetish of the diva to the realm of intermasculine relations by a series of displacements. “To see him is to worship him!” Sibyl cries of Dorian (61), and indeed Lord Henry concludes: “Being adored is a nuisance. Women treat us just as Humanity treats its gods. They worship us, and are always bothering us to do something for them” (70). But Dorian worships Sibyl as well: “I should have said that whatever they ask for they had first given us. They create Love in our natures. They have a right to demand it back” (70). Dorian, in other words, reverses the position of the feminine doubly: between Lord Henry and Basil, he is *neither* a female in worship of a male *nor* a male in worship of a female but a male worshiped by males. As Basil declares to him: “I was dominated, soul, brain, and power by you. You became to me the visible incarnation of that unseen ideal whose memory haunts us artists like an

exquisite dream. I worshiped you" (100). But then: "My dear boy, no woman is a genius. Women are a decorative sex. They never have anything to say, but they say it charmingly" (43). "I am afraid that women appreciate cruelty, downright cruelty, more than anything else. They have wonderfully primitive instincts. We have emancipated them, but they remain slaves looking for their masters, all the same. They love being dominated" (90). "Besides, women lived on their emotions. They only thought of their emotions. When they took lovers, it was merely to have someone with whom they could have scenes" (81). "That awful memory of woman! What a fearful thing it is! And what an utter intellectual stagnation it reveals!" (89). In each context, the subtle irony of the statement arises in its affinity to the behavior of *male* characters rather than female: it is ultimately Dorian's awful *memory* of murder which becomes unbearable to him, the trace of the body itself that will not be dissolved into mere aesthetic form. But it is not merely the dissonance of irony that renders the misogyny of such passages suspect. Their speaker, Lord Henry, finds his come-uppance in a verbal duel *on gender* with the rather Wilde-like Duchess of Monmouth, or Gladys:

"You are flirting disgracefully with him," said Lord Henry to his cousin. "You had better take care. He is very fascinating."

"If he were not, then there would be no battle."

"Greek meets Greek, then?"

"I am on the side of the Trojans. They fought for a woman."

"They were defeated."

"There are worse things than capture," she answered.

"You gallop with a loose rein."

"Pace gives life," was the *riposte*. (171)

"Describe us as a sex," Gladys challenges Lord Henry; "Sphinxes without secrets" comes the reply (171). This repartee, in essence a battle over Dorian, reveals more about the structure of homosexual desire in the novel ("Greek meets Greek") as a corollary of homosocial structure—Trojans battling Greeks for possession of Helen of Troy—but, dizzyingly, in contest of male and female over male. Appropriately, their tête-à-tête is interrupted by Dorian's fainting and remains unresolved.

The position of the Other is then bifurcated uncomfortably in several respects: its status in terms of gender (male/female), sub-

stance (Real/Symbolic, surface/interior), and epistemology (science/art) yields no hierarchy by which to orient a reader. One may read the apparently anti-Semitic descriptions ("a hideous Jew . . . smoking a vile cigar . . . with greasy ringlets and an enormous diamond . . . in the center of a soiled shirt" [44]), as well as the lampoons of the lower class, as similar incitements: they serve not to consolidate the position of the upper class Anglo-Saxon male but to reveal its predication on a variety of Others. In this sense, the female characters of the text are *pretextual*, not in the sense of preceding textuality but in the sense of providing pretexts for the establishment of masculinity. Dorian is then the folding back of that pretextuality upon itself, a figure who, encouraged by Lord Henry's language and Basil's painting, "wanders eastward" (44) into the East End, the realm of alterity itself: opium dens, prostitutes, the poor, and—though never named—homosexual activity. "It often happened that when we thought we were experimenting on others we were experimenting on ourselves" Lord Henry asserts (53). It is through these transpositions that the reader is encouraged to take Dorian as vehicle for identification but also as object, just as he takes himself as object, hence the structure of self-reflexion or "narcissism" so often cited in critical literature on this text:

I love beautiful things that one can touch and handle. Old brocades, green bronzes, lacquerwork, carved ivories, exquisite surroundings, luxury, pomp, there is much to be got from all these. But the artistic temperament that they create, or at any rate reveal, is still more to me. To become the spectator of one's own life, as Harry says, is to escape the suffering of life. (97)

As does Musil in *Törleß*, Wilde stresses equally the relation to objects and the relation to language in Dorian's development. The expanded sections of the novel, long reveries on the artifacts of cultures from all over the world which pass through Dorian's hands, suggest that the Faustian epistemophilia is fundamentally object-bound. Dorian's first alteration into aesthete occurs "with parted lips" (19), however, when Lord Henry taunts him to acknowledge desires in himself: "You, Mr. Gray, you yourself, with your rose-red youth and your rose-white boyhood, you have had passions that have made you afraid, thoughts that have filled you with terror, daydreams and sleeping dreams whose mere memory might stain your cheek with shame —" (19). Dorian comes to realize the effect

that such language has upon himself: "Words! Mere words! How terrible they were! How clear, and vivid, and cruel! One could not escape from them. And yet what a subtle magic there was in them! They seemed to be able to give plastic form to formless things . . ." (20). And so it is the "metaphors as monstrous as orchids" (110) in the mysterious "yellow book" (identifiable as Huysmans's *A rebours*) that Lord Henry gives to Dorian that convert him entirely into a "new Hedonist" and homosexual:

It was the strangest book that he had ever read. It seemed to him that in exquisite raiment, and to the delicate sound of flutes, the sins of the world were passing in dumb show before him. Things that he had dimly dreamed of were suddenly made real to him. Things of which he had never dreamed were gradually revealed. The style in which it was written was that curious jeweled style, vivid and obscure at once, full of *argot* and archaisms, of technical expressions and elaborate paraphrases. . . . (109)

The novel then seems to affirm a mimetic theory of Art as it influences human behavior: "The hero . . . became to him a kind of prefiguring type of himself. And, indeed, the whole book seemed to him to contain the story of his own life, written before he had lived it" (111). The text of the yellow book itself becomes a fetish to Dorian, his multiple copies each bound in a different color to suit the mood of the moment. "You poisoned me with a book once," Dorian accuses Lord Henry, who replies: "Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile" (188), which echoes the final line of the "Preface": "All art is quite useless."

The tensions of the text reach a fever pitch with the accumulation of scandal and rumor surrounding Dorian's activities—the disappearance and suicide of men he consorts with, the "disgrace" and exile of others. The narrator's omniscience becomes unconvincingly occluded on these matters, keeping the reader at bay with euphemism and circumlocution, essentially in the position of wealthy West-Enders. Basil's final confrontation—"why is your friendship so fatal to young men?" (131)—suggests that the same corruption by image and text, or art, that Dorian argues with Lord Henry, is at work in the sexual realm: desire is something that can be influenced, even constructed within another individual. With the mur-

der of Basil Hallward, the knife which Dorian felt plunge into him on realizing that he would age and his portrait would not ("a sharp pang of pain struck through him like a knife" [25]) and with which Basil threatens to destroy the painting will produce no resolution of textual tension but rather one more body to be disposed of. Dorian's blackmailing of Alan Campbell, through a slip of paper passed across a table (whose text cannot be viewed by the reader), ensures that his command to dispose of Basil's body by chemical incineration—"to destroy the thing that is upstairs" (146)—will be carried out. But to kill the "thing upstairs," the homosexual in the attic, necessitates the killing of same-sex sexual desire altogether, the killing of the subject itself. And so Alan's subsequent suicide prefigures Dorian's slashing of his portrait grown grotesque, his own suicide.

For most critics, Dorian's death resolves several conflicts still very much in flux in the text: art not only corrupts, it would seem, art *kills*. The "experiments" outside the pale of gender difference and hierarchy—and the making of oneself a work of art—end in murder, infamy, and self-destruction. "Form," in other words, is scarcely neutral—it is *informative* of subjects. Continental aestheticism, especially French Symbolism, seems banished back to the mainland of Europe. On one occasion, however, the narrative avails itself of a comment in the first person, one which suggests that a reading of *Dorian Gray* as morality play is premature:

For the canons of good society are . . . the same as the canons of art. Form is absolutely essential to it. It should have the dignity of a ceremony, as well as its unreality, and should combine the insincere character of a romantic play with the wit and beauty that make such plays delightful to us. Is insincerity such a terrible thing? I think not. It is merely a method by which we can multiply our personalities. (124)

In the structure of the social, and of morality as well, is every bit as informative, and as duplicitous, as representation in the realm of artistic production, is in fact indistinguishable from that mode. The narrative intervention, the sole moment in which the narrator speaks as "I" (as in *Törleß*), suggests that the multiplication of "personalities" is desirable, even a requirement of the "canons of society"—when in fact Dorian's "experiments" were precisely in the *multiplication of aesthetic objects and experiences*, in the fabrication of all possible "personalities."

The narrator's collapse of moral and aesthetic realms into the Symbolic, the attack on the portrait, cannot be read as judgment on Dorian or as a suicide per se. Rather, with the Faustian wish—"If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old" (25-26)—Wilde creates a structure in which all the marks of "sin" and "shame" accrue not to the body of Dorian himself but to the painting, which Dorian keeps in his attic closet and whose decay, whose deterioration into the "monstrous" (189), suggests not just aging but disease: "the rotting of a corpse in a watery grave was not so fearful" (136). The decay of the portrait commences with "lines of cruelty round the mouth" (80), moves through a sneer, a leer, then to "hideous lines that seared the wrinkling forehead and crawled round the heavy sensual mouth" (112), the "face of a satyr" (136). This baring of teeth (10) mirrors precisely the gesture of ostracism by which Dorian is shut out of West End society: "men would whisper to each other in corners, or pass him with a sneer" (123). The attack on this horrible Thing is thus an attempt at violence against the Symbolic itself, the realm in which the moral judgments made against Dorian *obtain*. The attack cannot succeed in violating that order because the body itself is bound up *materially* with that order, in this case a Victorian economy that consigns male-male desire to a space putatively beyond the pale of direct signification. The byproduct of this economy, its monster or *objet petit a*, its surplus, is an actual diseased body with a knife through its heart.

The attack on the portrait must thus be read as an accusation against Victorian England's organization of sexuality in the context of its structuring of culture generally; it is an attack mounted precisely from that space of alterity—but most especially of homosexuality—on which its self-maintenance as a culture is founded.<sup>9</sup> The narrator mobilizes Dorian and his forays into the East from object/site of disgust to one of desire primarily by *maintaining* the injunction against direct nomination, by veiling those visits to Whitechapel and Bluegate Field, and thus with the final revelation of the content of the attic, the reader stands accused of the ascription of death and decay to Dorian's body by simply having desired *to see*—to know—that content, in having desired to see the correspondence of "interior" sin and exterior horror.

The reader's viewing of the ephebe-turned-corpse is thus the logical outcome of the trap laid by Lord Henry at the outset: "The only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to

itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful" (19). Of the "monstrous fancies and misshapen dreams" that mark the concealed moments of male-male sexual encounters in the text: "There were poisons so subtle that to know their properties one had to sicken of them. There were maladies so strange that one had to pass through them if one sought to understand their nature" (52). The text thus privileges "homosexuality" not only as the *Schwerpunkt* of a *complete* knowledge of Western culture, including uncensored understanding of classical Greece, but as the very *pharmakon* of initiation into Western culture, the key to the *entire* canon. Thus Dorian could argue to Basil: "You ask me why [Lord] Berwick leaves a room when I enter it. It is because I know everything about his life, not because he knows anything about mine" (131). The "curious hard logic of passion," of injunctive (in both senses of the term) desire erected by Victorian culture ensnares itself. But Dorian is dead, absent in a sense, and Lord Henry, who issues these challenges, also gradually fades throughout the novel. The reader is left only with a narrator, whose accompaniment of the reader in the attic in the final scene confirms that the reader has been exposed to this poison, to this sight of degeneration—has become implicated in the Victorian fashioning, and slaying—of the homosexual. The narrator takes on this seat of epistemological privilege previously claimed by Lord Henry and Dorian—the only position *unimplicated* in the violence, it would seem—in showing the reader the body *in the structure of a fairy tale*. This was not a body at all but narrative: the conclusion reiterates the fantastic creation of the monstrous *as text*. *Dorian Gray*, then, seeks to function as had the "yellow book": as a dare to its readership to view the entirety of human desire obliquely without engaging that desire. The disturbing, and I believe crucial, consequence of the elevation of the *position* of the dandy/homosexual through the text is its need for this diseased body as its shadowy inverse: it is essentially unfree from its perpetuation in some form, in order to maintain that position.

### Sperelli's Erection or The Resurrection of the Fetish

Gabriele D'Annunzio's *Il Piacere* (1898) seems almost grotesque in its emulation of thematic material from *Dorian Gray*, but the relationship has not been explored critically. This may be owing to D'Annunzio's prose, an almost unbearable admixture of sen-

timentalized love scenes, catalogues of priceless antiques, and extensive literary references. Whereas Wilde was compelled by his publisher to lengthen his novel by inserting descriptions of the artifacts of Dorian's aesthetic education (which he did with little protest), D'Annunzio fills page after page with baubles and trinkets whose painfully transparent function is to claim privilege—not in this case preeminently an epistemological privilege (for the artifacts and citations often stand out of context) but a privilege based primarily on an aesthetics of *accumulation* or possession. The body in which the greatest amount of cultural objects and memory of literary text inhere is the superior body. "You must *make* your own life as you would any other work of art," Andrea Sperelli's father tells him before dying (24)—and little other influence upon the protagonist is recorded. Rather, the novel's four books treat his alternating pursuit of two women, Elena Muti and Maria Ferrès, with whom he believes himself deeply in love. "His mind was corrupted not only by overrefined culture, but also by actual experiments, and in him curiosity grew deeper in proportion as his knowledge grew wider" (24): the narrator's judgment, unlike in *Dorian Gray*, is that "decadence" itself is responsible for the "extremely feeble" state of Andrea's will and the downfall of what the narrator calls the "Arcadian" class of the Italian nobility.

Paradoxically, though, it is the fault of the democratization of the West that this decadence occurs: "The gray deluge of democratic mud, which swallows up so many beautiful and rare things, is likewise gradually engulfing that particular class of the old Italian nobility in which from generation to generation were kept alive certain family traditions of eminent culture, refinement, and art" (22). In other words, the disease of decadence is far from self-induced and self-occluded, as in *Dorian Gray*; rather, it is a toxin spilling over from the "masses," from lower classes whose incapacity to function in the realm of high culture—and their lack of aesthetic value per se—is seen as the very source of their contagion, along with the contagion of other "races," Asians and Jews in particular. Of Cavaliere Sakumi: "He was one of the secretaries to the Japanese Legation, very small and yellow, with prominent cheekbones and long, slanting, blood-shot eyes over which the lids blinked incessantly. . . . It was as if a *daimio* had been taken out of one of those cuirasses of iron and lacquer, so like the shell of some monstrous crustacean, and thrust into the clothes of a European waiter" (5). "Poor Sakumi," Elena intones (18), just as she murmurs "poor

little thing” on seeing the dying infant in a rural tavern: “The poor creature was wasted to a skeleton, its lips purple and erupted, the inside of its mouth coated with a white eruption. It looked as if life had abandoned the miserable little body, leaving but a little substance for fungoid growths to flourish in” (63). At no point in the novel is the assignation of disgust to the realm of alterity challenged or undermined. The few expressions of pity come entirely from Elena.

The most crucial shift from *Dorian Gray* is the replacement of the ephebe, in part, with women: Maria and Elena are clearly the objects here—“*This is my Ideal Woman!*” he exclaims (28) on seeing Elena for the first time. Women for Andrea have precisely the status of *objets d’art*: “he launched forward into a discourse on female beauty, displaying the profound knowledge of a connoisseur, taking pleasure in using the most highly colored expressions, with the subtle distinctions of an artist and a libertine” (181). Elena in particular is framed in red and white, much as Dorian had been: against a “red damask background,” Elena’s painted image has “a mouth that was ambiguous, enigmatical, sibylline, the mouth of the insatiable absorber of souls [and] a brow of marble whiteness, immaculately, radiantly pure” (276-77). And yet the text is not unaware of the exhaustion of fetish. As Andrea’s cousin warns him: “However, I must confess, my dear cousin, that your ‘fair white woman’ holding the Host in her pure hands seems to me a trifle suspicious. She has, to my mind, too much of the air of hollow shape, a robe without a body inside it, at the mercy of whatever soul, be it angel or demon, that chooses to enter it and offer you the communion” (113)—the inverse of the dying infant.

Andrea comes only slowly to realize the error in his aestheticizing view of women, but his realization (that he has been duped by protestations of love by Elena) yields only the insight that “love” does not exist:

The impurity which *then* the winged flame of the soul had covered with a sacred veil, had surrounded with a mystery that was half-divine, appeared now without the veil and without the mystery as a mere carnal lust, a piece of gross sensuality. (208)

This realization is only possible following Andrea’s wounding in a duel over a woman, not a fatal wounding, as in *Dorian Gray*, but an opportunity for convalescence midway through the novel.<sup>10</sup> As

Dorian shifts from others to self as experimental "object," Andrea at the same moment reverses that focus:

He was seized by a terrible and frenzied desire to overthrow the idol that still persistently rose up lofty and enigmatic before his imagination, do what he would to abase it. With cynical cruelty, he set himself to insulting, debasing, mutilating it. The destructive analysis he had already employed upon himself, he now turned upon Elena. (209)

The magic draught which had intoxicated him then now seemed but an insidious poison. (215)

The diva, the fetish, is not disposable, but she is recuperable as *antifetish* when her faithlessness is discovered: from the pronouncement that Elena is nothing more than "an unbalanced mind in a sensually inclined body" (214). Andrea is able to reclaim her as a negative icon: "The woman who had never been his, but to gain whom he had nearly lost his life, now rose up noble and unsullied before his imagination in all the sublime ideality of death" (214). Yet the puncture-wounding of the protagonist is preserved from Wilde, somehow necessary to the structure of the fetish as it develops. The feminine, it would seem, is cleft back away from the impaled male body, as the careful reader notes in Donna Maria's lips: "slightly parted, the upper one projecting the least little bit beyond the under one" (116) and in Elena's: "there was a sardonic sneer upon her lips" (279). But this mark, Dorian's sneer, surfaces in other figures as well:

He noticed that a carter had his hand wrapped in a blood-stained bandage, and that another . . . had the livid complexion, deep sunken eyes, and convulsively contracted mouth of a man who has been poisoned. (44)

Every minute his [Lord Humphrey Heathfield's] mouth twitched a little convulsively. (277)

Elena points out to Andrea: "You have changed somehow, I don't know quite what it is, but round your mouth, for instance, there are bitter lines that used not to be there" (195). The danger of the contagion of homosexuality, the axiomatic threat in Wilde's structure,

is decanted off into figures of disgust—both the women who are lost to him—but most especially into Lord Heathfield, who marries Elena and whose attempts to seduce Andrea meet with no success.

Although unnoticed in what little criticism exists on the novel, Lord Heathfield clearly functions as a Wilde figure. “The duke lowered his voice, he was evidently retelling the most appalling things. Andrea caught scraps of a highly spiced nature and, once or twice, the name of a newspaper famous in the annals of London scandal. He longed to hear more” (224). Slowly, Andrea becomes fascinated by, then disgusted by Heathfield’s hands: “so white, so significant, so expressive, so impossible to forget” (224). Dorian’s fascination, too, had been with Lord Henry’s hands: “His cool, white, flower-like hands, even, had a curious charm. They moved, as he spoke, like music, and seemed to have a language of their own” (21). But as the hands, in contact with illustrated books of erotica, “grew caressing as he touched each volume bound in priceless leather or material” (275), Andrea’s horror rises: “and his hands, those detestable hands, were perpetually on the move, while his arms retained their paralytic immobility. The unclean beast in him appeared in all its brazen ugliness and ferocity” (277-78). These hands, merely the *verso* of the worshipped hands of Elena and Maria (from whom Andrea requests a glove: “a pair of gloves is a totally different thing from a single one” [259]), suggest a sort of perpetual or perennial phallic threat in the fetish object, as they will markedly in *Törleß*. Likewise, Andrea’s discoveries about the “nature of woman” are accompanied by metaphors of incision or stabbing. “Certain words lacerated his ear . . . like the shriek of a steel knife over the pane of a glass” (277), or “he started up with the instinctive bound of a man who has been stabbed unawares” (194): something about the image of a pierced young male body is indispensable in the text’s economy.

“In short, the whole man was so unendurably obnoxious to Andrea that he clenched his teeth convulsively like a patient under the surgeon’s knife” (254). Lord Heathfield, whose nickname is (horrifyingly) “Mumps,” must become a *constitutional*, a biological miscreant for the text’s sustenance of *antifetish* to function. The narrator explains: “His gait was somewhat jerky and uncertain, like that of a man who already carries in his system the germ of paralysis, the first touch of spinal disease; his body remained rigid without following the movement of his limbs, like the body of an automaton” (276). And so Wilde’s narrator describes Dorian in the throes of addiction to his “passion”: “Men and women at such mo-

ments lose the freedom of their will. They move to their terrible end as automatons move" (164). Unlike Lord Henry's success in seducing Dorian with the yellow book, Andrea's physical arousal at the sight of erotica caressed by Heathfield's tremulous hands prompts him to leave in disgust: "'Going already? And what is the matter?' and he smiled a knowing smile at his 'young friend.' He knew well the effect of his books" (279). The narrator supports the protagonist's indignation at his own spinal cord reflex.

The narrative position, though sometimes judging Andrea's position harshly, tends far more often to mimic its protagonist's constant invocation of literary reference, to respond favorably to his instinctual revulsions, and though it claims to chart his "ruin," nothing—other than the loss of both women and the return to his Palazzo Zuccari—serves to close the novel. "There was a bitter and sickening taste in his mouth. He felt that from the contact of all these unclean people he was carrying away with him the germs of obscure and irremediable diseases" (310). The strange lack of closure, with only this vague accusation of uncleanness, indicates the extent to which the narrator, the text, has little purchase on its massive investment in fetish, positive or otherwise, and no distance at all on its attempt to wrest from the Wildean text a separation of narrative privilege from polluted homosexual. Andrea must suffer the advances, the poisoning, even the brief contact ("He would have given worlds not to have been obliged to touch those hands" [222]) with the homosexual—here biologically rather than culturally constituted, as are Jews and all Others—in order to maintain cultural order at all. The strategy, if one can call anything in literature strategic, is brilliant, in some respects: rather than counterposing a classical hero, invincible, fully phallic, to the dandy, one answers the Wildean text *through the very body it seems to need*. The owner of (Western) canon becomes once again the unabashedly heterosexual, upper-class male by bearing the traits—the lines of cruelty around the mouth, the wounded side—of the Wildean ephēbe-turned-dandy, by drinking the poison, the disease of the homosexual *pharmakon*. D'Annunzio seems to have taken Wilde's bait: the healthy subject cannot avoid contact with those nether realms of illicit sexuality but must now pass through them, "give in to things monstrous," in order to re-establish claim to cultural hegemony.

That this rearrogation of cultural superiority to the now "heterosexual" male misconstrues the Wildean critique of Victorian culture—in particular, the insistence upon both its violent construc-

tion and scandalous destruction of both “woman” and “homosexual”—is not accidental. It is, I believe, a founding gesture of literary fascism, by which I mean not simply “reactionary” modernist texts but texts whose *movens* is a perpetuation of fetish despite evidence of its “hollowness,” as Andrea’s cousin warns, an escalation of the essentializing of identity in the realm of the Other, an insistence upon complete domination of all aspects of human culture and its representation, and most especially an intensification of semantic and physical violence against the fetishized Other resulting from its own untenability. Musil, in *Törleß*, will engage the aspects of sexualization and the precipitation of violence in the (male) subject more exactly, by focusing on a slightly younger male, but that novella founders precisely between Wilde’s and D’Annunzio’s dispensations: if the male subject cannot fix itself in relation to the female or to the “homosexual” male, if these are “phantoms,” how can it begin to orient itself?

### Notes

1. See Cohen, *Talk on the Wilde Side 2*.
2. One thinks of Havelock Ellis’s statement to the contrary that Wilde’s notoriety “can scarcely have sufficed to increase the number of invert.” See the Introduction to his *Sexual Inversion*.
3. See Hyde, *Oscar Wilde: A Biography* and Ellmann, *Oscar Wilde*.
4. Cf. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Tales of the Avunculate: Queer Tutelage in *The Importance of Being Earnest*.” Sedgwick’s work offers an exception to the identitarian trend in recent Wilde studies.
5. See Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Oscar Wilde, Effeminacy, and the Modern Queer*—one of the few instances in the critical literature in which this character of modern gay life is well elaborated. Dollimore notes: “Today the Wildean strategy has re-emerged albeit in a changed form, while the Gidean politics of selfhood have suffered something of an eclipse” (72).
6. *De Profundis*, in which Wilde appears to repent or recant some of his earlier tactics and actions after being jailed, generally must be eliminated from consideration or heavily qualified if the image of forefather is to be preserved.

7. Exceptions are Norbert Kohl, *Oscar Wilde, Das literarische Werk zwischen Provokation und Anpassung* and Eike Schoenfeld, *Der deformierte Dandy: Oscar Wilde im Zerrspiegel der Parodie*.

8. The proximity to Wilde's voice is lost on few readers: "His bad characters talk like him" (Ellmann ix).

9. See Trevor Hope, "Sexual Difference and the Homosexual Male Imaginary."

10. Barbara Spackman, in *Decadent Genealogies*, argues that the wounding and convalescence constitute an "eviration" (68) in Sperelli's shift into an "altro corpo," another body, which Spackman reads as the "corpo dell'altro," or the "body of the Other" (71). I argue here that this passage through the wounded (vaginal) body of the ephebe, in emulation of the Wildean, is precisely the ground Sperelli/D'Annunzio must reclaim in order to reconstitute masculinity over and against effeminacy, rather than the feminine, as is clear in his (their) reaction to Lord Heathfield. One finds this extraordinary gesture of emulation (for the purpose of displacement) not only in this transitional literature of Italian "decadence" into fascist literature of early twentieth-century Italy but also in fascist literature of the German *Freikorps* (cf. Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*) and in war diaries such as Ernst Jünger's *In Stahlgewittern*.

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